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Experiences of Low Socioeconomic Community College Students Anticipating Transition to a 4-Year University

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Abstract

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by

Richard Hayward

MS, Kaplan University, 2015

BA, Eckerd University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Low socioeconomic status students in the United States are facing declining completion rates for the attainment of 4-year degrees, which may have consequences for their economic well-being. The purpose of this study was to understand lower socioeconomic status students' experiences regarding a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness while attending community college and transitioning to a 4-year university. The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in Strayhorn's findings pertaining to a sense of belonging, Bandura's social cognitive theory, Adelman's momentum theory, and Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's transition theory. This basic qualitative study used interviews with 11 community college students planning to transition to a 4-year university in the Southeastern United States. Interviews were analyzed using open coding to discern 3 emergent themes: the genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging, institutional encouragement, and adaptation for collegiate life. The community college the students attended was perceived to successfully assist the self-selected students with enhancing their sense of belonging, adjusting approaches to academic advising, and extending activities that allowed the lesser prepared students, in particular, to have more positive experiences. Application of the findings by leaders in community colleges and 4-year universities may impact positive social change through the increase of 4-year degrees completed due to more successful transitions from a community college by low socioeconomic status students. These low socioeconomic status students' economic futures may also benefit as a result of the findings.

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Dedication

Education is the passport to tomorrow, and the future belongs to those who prepare for it today. –Malcolm X

To paraphrase Dr. Victor Frankl, we all have meaning in life; it is just that our meaning is different from one another and that our meaning is also different from day to day. We are the sum of our experiences, and my experiences have led me to know that my meaning is to help change the results of the educational system in the United States. Whether I do that in my lifetime or influence others to do it after I am gone, my meaning will have been justified.

There are so many that have helped me to this realization and encouraged me through this process. I would like to thank those who set an example for me through their tenacity with the challenges that life threw their way. To my mom and dad whom I still miss, thank you. My two big brothers and my sister, who each in their individual ways set an example for me to follow; I love you, and thank you. Bob, the impression upon me in your uniform and our days together changed my life; brother and friend. James, your dedication to work and study; inspiring. DeeDee, teaching me to tie my shoes, taking me to see *Planet of the Apes*, and sticking around, thank you! To my five children: Ashley, Jessie, and Sam thank you so much for the time you spend with me and for making me believe every year in Santa. To Alex who has tolerated a step-father who could have been better at his job. To my son Harry, Dr. Harrison Hayward, M.D., of whom I am so proud, no prouder than I am of my other children, but who sat me down halfway through this doctoral journey when I was ready to quit, drafted a list of why I should quit, and why I

should stick it out; your help was beyond needed and accepted. Thirty-years my junior, you are the wisest person I know, and it is father who depends on son rather than the other way around. You, my sonny boy, have set the example for me to follow; thank you.

While there are many others, among them, Kim, Jenifer, Kat, Rick, Rosella, Brian, Beverly, Ewwa, Duvie, Kevin, John, Matt, Tia, Z, and Jeff who gave me time and understanding; I thank you.

But for the love of my life, Kristine, you started by giving me the gift of time, a most precious commodity, by lifting me up when I was at my lowest and suggesting I go back to school at 50 years old to earn my associate's degree. Twelve years later, I complete this dissertation, and my doctorate only because of you. You have been my lover, my wife, and most of all, my best friend. I won't say thank you, because it is just not good enough. The English language is full of words, but none can show my appreciation. What I can do is continue to give you myself so that in some small way, you know my sense of gratitude.

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Sister Mary Lauren, who was the first educator to let me experience my own sense of belonging. You didn't teach me a thing but allowed me to learn and I called upon that more than you could guess while learning throughout life. Brother Francis Lewis, thank you for taking me under your wing and seeing to it that the vultures didn't eat me alive. Mark Leib, who helped me take my blindfold off and discover my passion for learning, the thrill of reading, and the utter joy of putting words to paper. (Mom, your belief in me as a writer has often been my part of my motivation.) Dr. Judith Cardenas, who compassionately passed along knowledge, tolerated questions, and inspired me to help others by gaining the knowledge to do so. I found answers to questions, but also learned to question answers.

Prior researchers whose influence spurred my curiosity and fueled my tenacity include so many, but the inspiration provided by Dr. Strayhorn, Dr. Braxton, Dr. Tinto, Dr. DeWine, Drs. Li, Gallasza, and Favos, Dr. Pichon, Drs. Sadowski and Pediaditis, Dr. Schlossberg, and Dr. Xu proved to be invaluable.

Now, the best for last. Dr. Alice Eichholz who sat with me three times during my first residency shedding light on positive social change, which ultimately led, in part, to my belief that I could affect change in education. Dr. Cheryl Keen, my mentor, my chair, and now my fellow doctor. I insisted on calling you Dr. Keen for 2 years out of an immense amount of respect while I worked on this dissertation despite your invitation to call you by your first name. I don't respect you any less but now will now address you as Cheryl. I am far from your equal, but we are now both Doctors of Education and I look

forward to our journey continuing, and hope I exceed your expectations. Your constant edits drove me crazy, but in the end, made me a better researcher, a better writer, a better reader, and ultimately a scholar. I am and will be forever indebted to you. And finally, to the American educational system: you suck, let's get it right!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

As the economic distance between the rich and the poor continues to grow in the United States (Franko, 2017), the attainment of a bachelor's degree increases the likelihood of poorer students having increased earning (Li, Gallazsza-Graniso & Gardo-Fayos, 2016; Pinheiro, Langa, & Pausits, 2015). Access to, retention of, and, ultimately, completion of college degrees has been prominent in the news, politics, academic research, and conversations (Cooper, 2017; Lopez, 2018; Tate, 2017). Access, retention, and completion issues beget more concern for the lower socioeconomic status student as they struggle with additional obstacles during their higher education than do their cohorts from a middle or higher economic stratum (Modrek, Kuhn, Conway, & Arvidson, 2017). In addition to the academic challenges higher education may place on a student, these lower socioeconomic status students also, in many circumstances, have to struggle with fitting school into a schedule that can include multiple jobs and responsibilities at home that may involve caring for others such as children, siblings, parents, or grandparents (Zembrodt, 2018). Their environment also carries with it financial restrictions that can result in challenges with purchasing textbooks and obstacles to participating in campus events, all of which is compounded by obstacles to getting proper nutrition and maintaining health (Bjorklund-Young, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

Admission to a community college is often the path forward for low socioeconomic students, not only due to the reduced cost, but also because admission requirements are less strict, most often with open admissions (Rosinger, 2017). Open

access addresses the challenge of providing access to college for these students (Castro & Cortez, 2016).

Leading researchers have identified characteristics of lower socioeconomic status students that have led to their attrition throughout their time in higher education. The commonalities include a lower sense of belonging (Braxton, 2002; Strayhorn, 2012, 2014, 2016; Tinto, 2012), a lack of proper academic advising or a lack of understanding of the advice available or given (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016), and students being less academically prepared than their middle to higher family income peers (Winograd, Verkuilen, Weingarten, & Walker, 2018). According to Strayhorn (2014), students' self-efficacy can provide, under the right conditions, the determination to become involved and to find a sense of belonging. Pulliam and Sasso (2016) found that early academic advising, even before matriculation, can provide the momentum to carry a student forward, building success term after term.

In this chapter, I present the background, the problem statement, the purpose, the conceptual framework, the nature, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of this study.

Background

People in the lower socioeconomic stratum in the United States are typically in the lowest quartile of all income earners. Many studies on lower socioeconomic status students have used the receipt of a full Pell Grant award as the benchmark for identifying low socioeconomic status (Castro & Cortez, 2016; Gershenfield, Hood, & Zhan, 2016). Pell Grants are part of U.S. federal financial aid and are awarded to U.S. citizens and

Green Card holders who apply and are attending regionally or nationally accredited colleges, universities, and trade schools. Lower socioeconomic status students are less likely to come from a home where a parent has gone to college and are more likely to be members of minorities (Schneider, Kim, & Klager, 2017). These students also tend not to have health insurance coverage, have less than proper nutrition, and are more likely to come from unstable living environments (Bjorklund-Young, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

If the school district in which a K-12 student lives provides quality education, then advancement into the successful completion of higher education becomes more likely (Leachman, Masterson, & Figueroa, 2017). In lower-income areas, property values are less, creating less property tax revenue for school districts, ultimately resulting in less resources and a lower quality education from elementary through high school, allowing for an increased chance of a student being unprepared for higher education (Lavertu & St. Clair, 2018; Leachman et al., 2017). These students may not only be unprepared for the academic requirements of college but might also be uninformed about collegiate expectations. It can be likely, too, that a student will not be aware of all the opportunities that grants, scholarships, discounts, and student loans can provide for economic sustainability while in college (Coomer-Cox, 2019).

In their personal lives and through their education before their arrival at college, lower socioeconomic status students also have less access to technology (Ball, Huang, Rikard, & Cotten, 2019). Fewer underprepared, lower-income students may be enrolling in college presently due to recent increases in employment opportunities and improvement in the economy (Juskiewicz, 2017). Accordingly, the reported higher

graduation rates are among students of middle to upper income, while lower socioeconomic status students have completion rates that are declining (Means & Payne, 2017; Zarifa, Kim, Seward, & Walters, 2016). These rates could signal a potential worsening of the problem described by Franko (2017) by inadvertently widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

The attainment of a higher education degree correlates with higher incomes across the lifespan, and those in the lower socioeconomic stratum benefit most from a higher education completed when measured by the percentage of income increased (Burris & Hacker, 2017). According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, a person with an associate degree will earn approximately $400,000 more than the typical high school graduate, and a person with a bachelor's degree will make roughly $1,000,000 more during a 20-year career (Vilorio, 2016).

In the mid-20th century, a high school diploma was the benchmark for education and entrée into the middle class. Before the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the bachelor's degree replaced the high school diploma as the new benchmark (Bjorklund-Young, 2016; Payne, Hodges, & Hernandez, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics completed a longitudinal study with a sample of 15,000 high school students and broke the group down into quartiles based on family income. In the lowest quartile, only 14% completed a college degree, by comparison to 60% of the highest quartile (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In the early part of the 21st century, policymakers concentrated on improving access to higher education for all with a focus

on minorities; presently, the concern has shifted to college completion (Goodman, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2017).

Students who begin their higher education at a community college are less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than their counterparts who start at a 4-year institution (Hart, 2019; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Scott, Thigpin, & Bentz, 2017). Feeder programs throughout the United States provide professors from the 4-year institution to teach at the community college following the same syllabus for a class offered at the 4-year college, while students pay the reduced tuition of the community college. Community college tuition is less because of subsidies received by the state and federal government (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2017). Students in these feeder programs also have access to resources from the university, such as the library. Two studies found bachelor graduation rates are higher for participants from such programs compared to similarly prepared and resourced students who do not enter through these types of programs (Patton, 2017; Walker, Sherman, & Shea, 2016).

There is a disconnect in these feeder programs specifically as it applies to the qualifications a freshman student needs to enter a university system and the requirements for a student to transition from a local to the university community college; this disconnect can present challenges for the community college student (Domingo & Nouri, 2016). According to Domingo and Nouri (2016), students enter the community college under open admissions, and to obtain their associate degree must have a 2.0 GPA. They then find themselves competing with students in their junior year who are more academically advanced. The difference in these admissions standards could cause more

significant challenges for the lower socioeconomic status student transitioning with an associate degree as they compete with possibly higher qualified students at the 4-year university. While these feeder programs sound promising for those students seeking to keep their debt burden low by streamlining the transition from 2- to 4-year institutions, lower socioeconomic status students who attend college can arrive at the community college unprepared (Johnson, 2017; Le, Mariano, & Faxon-Mills, 2016), and their attrition rates are higher (Sadowski, Stewart, & Pediaditis, 2018). However, even if a student does arrive academically prepared, these marginalized students are significantly less likely to transition to a 4-year institution (Le et al., 2016). Also, factors contributing to the lack of completion of a bachelor's degree for these students include a lack of a sense of belonging (Johnson, 2017; Lee, 2018; Strayhorn, 2016) and a less than adequate use of academic advice (Grutzik & Ramos, 2016; Mead, 2018; Vannatter-White, & Perrone-McGovern, 2017). While researchers have studied a sense of belonging, academic advising, and academic preparedness as causes of attrition rates among lower socioeconomic students, few researchers have focused on those students transitioning from a community college to a 4-year university. In my research, I found no studies that examined all three contributing factors together or on how they may be interrelated.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon scholars today to research the phenomenon of the success or failure of transition programs from community college to a 4-year university as it applies to the lower socioeconomic student. Further, findings regarding a sense of belonging, academic advising, and academic preparedness and their possible interrelation as they affect attrition may lead to change, maintenance, or development of policy.

Problem Statement

The problem that prompted this study is low transition rates from community colleges to 4-year universities for low socioeconomic status students. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds more often begin their postsecondary education at community colleges (Davidson & Wilson, 2017; Katsiaficas, 2017; Lopez, 2018). Researchers have found that the three main reasons for high attrition rates for low socioeconomic status community college students transitioning to a 4-year university are a lack of a sense of belonging, inadequately given or received academic advice, and less than required academic preparedness (Coomer-Cox, 2019; Pulliam & Sasso, 2016; Strayhorn, 2016). Strayhorn's (2016) review of the literature suggested that a sense of belonging, or the lack of it, affects low socioeconomic students' retention. There are struggles for these students to obtain and use proper academic advising (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). Xu, Ran, Fink, Davis, and Dunbar (2018) found that 80% of freshmen beginning at community college planned to go on to earn a bachelor's degree, yet only 17% did so. The cause of the disparity in numbers may be better understood by exploring the experiences of the lower socioeconomic status student regarding belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness during the transitioning process from community college to a 4-year university. Discovery of lower socioeconomic status students ' experiences

concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness may provide for improved practices and policies of transitional programs while potentially resulting in improved student outcomes.

Research Question

RQ: What are the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness during the transitioning process from community college to a 4-year university?

Conceptual Framework

I used Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) as the basis for guiding and understanding students' experiences as they transition to the 4-year university. To further understand a sense of belonging, I referenced Strayhorn's (2016) model of college students' sense of belonging. Strayhorn, like Maslow (1954), described a sense of belonging as a basic human need.

Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory guided me to a deeper understanding of the lower socioeconomic student's experiences with academic advising. Bandura (2004) posited that internal determinants affect behavior and actions. A student's self-efficacy, thoughts, and motivation could influence their use, or lack thereof, involving academic advising. Additionally, Bandura (1997) argued that external determinants, in this case, the lower socioeconomic environment from which students come, can also influence their ability to take advantage of academic advising.

Finally, Adelman's (1999, 2006) momentum theory guided my understanding of students' experiences of academic preparedness. Momentum theory focuses on the

tenacious advancement for a person with one success after another. Improved preparedness can apply to areas outside of academics such as financial aid, responsibilities at home, and how employment and other circumstances can hinder momentum.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with semistructured interviews with lower socioeconomic status students attending a community college in the Southeast United States who are enrolled and participated in a transitioning program in a proximate state university. I asked 11 participating students to respond to questions and probes regarding their sense of belonging, their experiences with academic advising, and their experiences as related to college preparedness. This approach allowed me to deepen my understanding of students' feelings regarding their experiences and the meaning of those experiences as they evolve as students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I analyzed the data using open coding, from which I generated categories and then themes.

Definitions

Academic advising: The act of providing information to a student so that they might make informed decisions (Harris, 2018; Hart, 2019; He & Hutson, 2016).

Academic preparedness: Readiness for the endeavors of going to college (Baber, 2018; Zembrodt, 2018).

Lower socioeconomic student: A student receiving a Pell Grant (Bjorklund-Young, 2016; Vannatter-White & Perrone-McGovern, 2017).

Sense of belonging: Acceptance by a group, welcoming, a perception of value, (Goodenow, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012).

Transition: Moving from one thing to another (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). A student moving vertically from one level of education (high school to college or community college to a 4-year university) to another (Baber, 2018; Thomas, Walsh, Torr, Alvarez, & Malagon, 2018).

Assumptions

I assumed that the participating students provided truthful answers about their individual experiences and vocalized their feelings concerning belonging, advising, and preparedness. I identified my participants as they responded to posters and other forms of solicitations as having received full Pell Grants, and I assumed their qualifications in this matter to be honest.

Scope and Delimitations

I collected data from lower socioeconomic status college students at one community college regarding the transition process from a community college to a 4-year university as these students experienced their lives in higher education as it pertains to a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness. The scope was limited to students at one feeder program of the many that exist in the United States to ease the transfer of students from community college to college. The scope was also limited to students receiving Pell Grants, which excluded low-income students who hadn't applied for or received Pell Grants. I used Pell Grants as a delimitation because it allowed students to self-identify and allowed for consistency of socioeconomic status among

participants. Other aspects of the student experience besides these three that surfaced in the interview were analyzed. A delimitation while examining student experiences with academic advising was that I only sought responses from students, as this research used no input from advisers or other administrators regarding academic advising.

Limitations

There are feeder programs throughout the United States, most of which work in the same or similar manner as the program from which the participants in this study came, but the findings will have limited transferability to other such feeder programs, which may vary in many ways. A second limitation of this study was the lack of an opportunity to interview low socioeconomic status students who have already transitioned to a 4-year institution, as well as those who have not moved ahead despite their initial intention to do so. There was limited access to students who may have previously transitioned and identifying students who did not complete the transition process may have required access to records that are protected by FERPA. Thirdly, dependent students who rely on their parents financially may not be aware of family income or have a full grasp of their financial aid package, including Pell Grants, which was a qualification for participating. Students who are not well informed about their receipt of a Pell Grant may not have recognized the opportunity to participate. While the receipt of Pell Grants has been a common element for defining a low socioeconomic student (Bjorkland-Young, 2016; Burris & Hacker, 2017; Gibbons, Rinehart, & Hardin, 2019; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson,2016), current research indicates that just under 69% of low socioeconomic students receive Pell Grants, potentially limiting

the supply of participants (Delisle, 2017). As I am a privileged White male, I may have intimidated some of my participants and potentially altered their responses. As a precaution, I "dressed down," for the interview and used vocabulary that is more common among students at the community college level.

Significance

This study may be significant as the findings provide insights into facilitating more successful student outcomes for lower socioeconomic status students. In the race for a college degree, if these marginalized students begin signficantly behind the rest of the student body, they may not be able to compete. The findings in this study may help fill a void in the current research by bringing understanding to the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning their sense of belonging, their perceived value and use of academic advising, and their preparedness as they enter community college and progress through a planned transitional program to a 4-year university. The original contribution of this study may deepen the understanding of these students' experiences, which could influence policy by either effecting change or through expanding existing programs to other institutions. The findings may help policy-makers to facilitate increased completion of higher education, which ultimately has an impact on narrowing the distance between the rich and the poor (Li et al., 2016; Pinheiro et al., 2015).

Summary

Prior research on retention for lower socioeconomic status students exists, but this research has not concentrated on the transition from community college to a 4-year university. The elements that I focused on, a sense of belonging, academic advising, and

college preparedness, have been separately studied in previous research regarding student success. I, however, examined these experiences as they combine and interrelate with one another specifically for lower socioeconomic status students and their transition to a 4-year university. Chapter 2 contains an introduction to the existing literature on these topics. Chapter 2 also includes the strategy used to identify the literature, the theoretical and conceptual framework expanded upon from this chapter, and an empirical review of the existing literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that prompted this study is low transition rates from community colleges to 4-year universities for low socioeconomic students. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend 4-year institutions. (Baber, 2018; Xu et al., 2018). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to increase the understanding of the experiences related to sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness of lower socioeconomic status students enrolled at a community college and transitioning to a 4-year university. Exploring the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness may provide for improved practices and policies of transitional programs while potentially resulting in improved student outcomes.

The existing literature regarding transition from community colleges to 4-year institutions as experienced by lower socioeconomic status students is largely quantitative (Laanan & Jain, 2017; Jenkins-Guarnieri, Horne, & Wallis, 2015). The qualitative studies have focused on just one issue of those experiences, most often students' sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness (Gujare & Tiwari, 2016; Knaggs, Sondergeld, Schardt, 2013). Articles regarding a sense of belonging have examined from a psychological perspective how a person feels when they are or are not accepted (Rugel, Carpiano, Henderson, & Brauer, 2019; Jury et al., 2017). Some authors wrote specifically about belonging in a college or university atmosphere (Strayhorn, 2012; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). In this literature review, I focus on previous research regarding different types of academic advising and the best uses of different approaches.

Few articles explain the approaches used with lower socioeconomic status students while others break down the use of particular approaches among race or delineated by institutional type. Academic preparedness has been studied mostly from a racial perspective and not extensively analyzed as preparedness applies to this socioeconomic group.

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds more often begin their post-secondary education at community colleges (Davidson & Wilson, 2017; Katsiaficas, 2017; Lopez, 2018). Strayhorn's (2016) review of the literature suggested that a sense of belonging or the lack of it affects low socioeconomic students' retention. There are struggles for these students to obtain and use proper academic advising (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016). Jenkins et al. (2014) found that 80% of freshman beginning at community college planned to go on to earn a bachelor's degree, yet those who did transition was limited to 17%.

In this chapter, I share how and where I found the scholarly works included herein. I explain the conceptual framework and review empirical research on students' sense of belonging, their use of and feelings about academic advising, and their overall preparedness for starting their higher education at a community college and their readiness for arrival at a 4-year university through the transition process.

Literature Search Strategy

I called upon multiple databases to identify peer-reviewed empirical literature for this dissertation. The primary sources included: EBSCO, SAGE Premier, ProQuest, ERIC, Taylor & Francis, the Walden Library using Thoreau, and Google Scholar.

Keyword searches in these databases utilized the following words and phrases: *socioeconomic, income*, *retention*, *community college*, *university*, *attrition*, *sense of belonging*, *belonging*, *welcome*, *readiness*, *preparedness*, *academic advice*, *academic advising*, *advice*, *intrusive advising*, *prescriptive advising*, *developmental advising*, *teacher-as-advisor*, *transition*, *transfer, college credits*, *first-generation*, *non-traditional*, *persistence*, *graduation*, and *completion*. With only a few exceptions, I chose to include articles published within the 5 years prior to 2020.

Conceptual Framework

This study centered on the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students in relation to a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness. Several theories influenced my understanding of each of these three elements. Strayhorn's (2012, 2016) findings directly pertain to a sense of belonging, while Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory influenced the study regarding academic advising, and Adelman's (2006) momentum theory served as the backdrop for studying college preparedness. By developing an understanding of the three elements and their guiding theories as they relate to one another, I found them to also interconnect with Schlossberg's' transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman (1995).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

I used Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1995) as the basis for understanding students' experiences as they plan to transition to the 4-year university. Schlossberg et al. (1995) explained that when a person transitions, they move out, in, and through experiences. Schlossberg et al.'s work was expanded upon by

Anderson et al. (2012), and one of the types of transition studied was that of an anticipated change such as graduation from high school. As students approach graduation from high school, they still may do so with trepidation, despite graduation being anticipated. Students are forced to contend with letting go of the past, the years in high school, which can be seen through Schlossberg et al.'s definition of moving out of a set of circumstances. I studied, in part, the experiences of low socioeconomic status students as they transitioned from high school to community college and their plans to transition to a 4-year institution to understand their first experience in transitioning.

Every student's experience of transition can be different based on what Anderson et al. (2012) defined as the 4Ss (*situations, self, support,* and *strategies*). Situations are individualized as they may be for lower socioeconomic status students as they transition from high school to community college and again from the community college to a 4-year university. Prior experiences as students transition from high school to community college can affect their situation when approaching the transition from community college to the 4-year university.

Socioeconomic status for students may play a significant role in the next S, self. Lower socioeconomic status students are likely to possess less self-esteem and self-efficacy in a college environment (Strayhorn, 2016). This can add to the apprehension felt as the transition continues and affect anxiety levels and coping skills. Josselson (1996) found that those from a specific culture such as lower socioeconomic environments can unknowingly set limitations for themselves that curtail their academic performance.

Support, the third S, can originate at home, through peers both on and off-campus, and through faculty who can offer support to the low socioeconomic student. When it is understand what a student experiences as support, researchers can learn how to enhance a sense of belonging, access to and use of academic advising, and college preparedness for students.

Finally, Anderson et al.'s (2012) transition theory directs attention to strategies, the final S. Coping with transition involves the utilization of resources. In this study, those resources can be the quality of elementary and secondary education as it prepares students for college; the use of academic advising to steer students through challenges that can hinder or aid in the transition; and the interactions with peers, faculty, and staff as their sense of belonging is developed or not. If students have a successful transition from high school to the community college environment, they will have acquired skills to cope better with the transition from the community college to the 4-year university (Anderson et al., 2012).

A Sense of Belonging

To further my understanding of a sense of belonging as I researched the available literature, I was guided by Strayhorn's (2016) student development theory to understand an individual's feelings and behaviors regarding a sense of belonging as they go through the transition experience, whether those experiences are actual or perceived. Strayhorn (2016) described positive effects on a student's sense of belonging coming from intergroup contact when these groups have "equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support" (Strayhorn, 2016, p. 59). Strayhorn identified three

traits in application to students' development of a sense of belonging: the student's personality, the influence of the society or environment around them, and their perception of their value. Strayhorn (2009) combined the use and understanding of human capital, social capital, and cultural capital in what Strayhorn described as sociocultural theory. Human capital, in this study, the investment made in learning, social capital, supportive relationships, and cultural capital, a person's beliefs, tastes, and preferences, can all impact a student's feelings of acceptance upon arrival at and through their time at community college (Strayhorn, 2016). Strayhorn's model (2012) also follows that of Maslow (1954) in that a sense of belonging is a basic human need. Strayhorn posited that if students perceived as positive or negative an experience on or off campus it could permit the growth or underdevelopment of their sense of belonging. The accumulation of a lower socioeconomic status student's experiences over the lifetime can also affect their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012).

Academic Advising

Regarding academic advising, I was guided by Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory to understand how various learned skills, including those acquired through academic advising, contribute to an increased sense of self-efficacy that can result in positive student outcomes. Lower socioeconomic status students can struggle with access to academic advising due to a variety of reasons. Bandura (2004) argued that positive self-efficacy is influenced by people's ability to get and stay organized. That organization can create opportunities for the low socioeconomic student to schedule time to meet with academic advising. Bandura (2004) wrote how positive self-efficacy allows an individual

to expand that efficacy in other areas of their life. For example, Bandura's (2004) study guided me regarding academic advising and allowed me to realize that academic advising can go beyond course sequencing and enhance students' lives concerning health and other issues that exist off-campus.

Academic Preparedness

Adelman's momentum theory (1999, 2006) helped guide my understanding of students' experiences of academic preparedness. Adelman (1995) posited that it is college preparedness that starts students off on the track to success or failure. Momentum theory addresses how the lack of preparedness can be improved upon, such as through summer bridge programs or remedial coursework to improve readiness, which may increase momentum. In exploring the momentum of lower socioeconomic status students, Adelman (2006) also named how elements such as financial aid, responsibilities at home, and employment can hinder a student's momentum.

Rationale for Conceptual Framework

In summary, the theories I have included in the conceptual framework have guided the development of the interview questions and will help me interpret my findings. In particular, I will draw on Strayhorn's (2016) construct of a sense of belonging utilizing human capital, social capital, and cultural capital. I explored academic advising experiences in my study through interview questions that were, in part, designed through the lens of Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997) and its application to self-efficacy. Part of Bandura's (2004) theory states that behavior is learned from the environment, through observation. Bandura (2004) furthered his theory explaining that

there is a vital relationship between stimuli and responses. My interview questions regarding academic advising will help me identify the student's observations and experiences with academic advising regarding how it stimulated them and how they perceive they responded (Bandura, 1997). Momentum theory provided by Adelman (1999, 2006) will guide my path to a better understanding of prior experiences affecting current and future experiences. Finally, I have used the theory of Schlossberg et al. (1995) and Anderson et al. (2012) to write interview questions that will help me understand transitions in my seeking to understand how a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness play a role in transitions.

Review of Empirical Literature

What follows is an examination of research regarding a sense of belonging, academic advising, and academic preparedness. By studying these three different elements in my literature review, I will be more prepared, with a deeper understanding of the lower socioeconomic student's experiences to conduct the interviews, code the responses, and produce findings. I have presented in this literature review findings from prior published academic works without any path that is steered by bias to discover the necessary understanding of the background of a lower socioeconomic student's experiences with a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness. Through that understanding, then the research and findings in subsequent chapters should prevail with a conclusion that substantiates the need for further research.

A Sense of Belonging

There are many reasons community college students, including lower socioeconomic status students, do not complete community college (Davidson & Wilson, 2017; Hart, 2019; Willcox, Liguori, & Postle, 2018). One of the precursors to attrition, particularly for the low socioeconomic student, can be lack of a sense of belonging (Means, & Payne, 2017). Lower socioeconomic status students who have a sense of belonging in college are more likely to complete their degree, and often their feelings of belonging come from their engagement in activities on campus (Lopez, 2018).

A sense of belonging not only applies to how students relate to their particular campus but also involves their feelings about being in college. Students who come from lower-income families can see the less expensive community college option as less desirable and feel that they are beginning their college education in a lower academic environment (Arnold, Chewning, Castleman, & Page, 2015; Winograd et al., 2018).

Strayhorn (2012, 2015) has written extensively on the importance of a sense of belonging and referred to a sense of belonging as a basic human need. Living in the conditions that accompany lower socioeconomic status can deleteriously affect one's sense of belonging outside of their day to day environment, as is the case on a college campus (Pemberton, Fahmy, Sutton, & Bell, 2017). Within an academic setting, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) found that a sense of belonging was associated with academic motivation, success, and persistence.

This sense of belonging has been defined differently by scholars. Strayhorn stated that it is the "degree to which an individual feel respected, valued, accepted, and needed

by a defined group" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 87). Goodenow (1993) explained a sense of belonging as being received by those on campus in a manner that is welcoming, having the perception that they are valued and included in both the classroom and in activities on campus. Mendoza, Suarez, and Bustamente (2016) defined a sense of belonging as valued peer engagement and having an understanding of one's needs being met.). Most succinctly, Hurtado, Ruiz Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann (2015) identified a sense of belonging as a "psychological dimension of student integration" (p. 62). Ultimately, when students do feel that sense of belonging, they build a connection with faculty, peers, and the institution (Brown, 2016).

Privileged and minoritized (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016) students (including low-income students), who took part in Vaccaro and Newman's (2016) study defined a sense of belonging, in part, differently the privileged students included in their description of a sense of belonging as "friendly, fun (and) comfortable," (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 931-932), and the minoritized students used the terms "safe, fitting in, and respect" (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 931-932). Common to both groups was a sense of belonging meaning being "comfortable and being part of a group" (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, p. 931-932).

Factors that enhance a sense of belonging. Several studies have addressed how students can build a sense of belonging or connection to faculty, peers, and the institution. The researchers DeWine, Bresciani Ludvik, Tucker, Mulholland, and Bracken (2017), through a phenomenological study, sought to understand the experiences of 20 community college students who were taking classes provided by the 4-year institution to

where they intended to transition. The researchers found that while lower socioeconomic status students had the least likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree, those that did had a sense of belonging (DeWine et al., 2017). The students reported that their sense of belonging was positively affected by campus familiarity, comfort with peers and faculty, and an affirmative pre-transition program. At another institution, these same researchers found at one particular 4-year university provided housing that grouped community college transitioning students together and these students had higher retention through the bachelor's degrees and reported a positive sense of belonging (DeWine et al., 2017).

For many, the sense of belonging begins in the classroom as the faculty interacts with students. Pichon (2016) found that if students are encouraged and faculty assist students in-class participation, the sense of belonging increased. Sadowski et al. (2018) followed 27 students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who received higher levels of academic advising from faculty than is typically provided by academic advisors on the campus where their research took place. Faculty assisted in establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging both in and out of the classroom, by aiding in the creation of and directing students to, campus locations where there would be peer involvement, various clubs, sport teams, events, support groups, mentor programs, and community involvement in which students could participate. Sadowski et al. (2018) found that the students built a sense of belonging not just through the comfort with their professors but also with their peers. Student involvement in one activity in or out of the classroom can lead to participation in other activities, ultimately providing students with a higher sense of belonging and even a commitment to the school (Kirby, 2015). While obtaining a

sense of belonging can be acquired holistically through all the activities available it is the foundation built in the classroom that can enable students to seek other activities that secure that sense of belonging (Booker, 2016).

Barber's (2018) study of 19 college students who had earned an associate degree at a community college and then successfully transitioned to a 4-year university, all reported that a sense of belonging strongly influenced their perseverance (Baber, 2018). Most of the 19 had already graduated college with their bachelor's degree, and the remaining five were still enrolled. When asked about their sense of belonging, shared among the answers given were that they had a support system and identified goals (Baber, 2018).

Having learning communities, peer mentoring, and campus interactions provide students with a greater sense of belonging impacting retention (Soria & Taylor, 2016). Also, low-income high school students without a mentor in their community were less likely to enroll in college according to Woods and Preciado (2016), who found that mentoring through the SAT and college preparatory process added to the students' self-efficacy. Their analysis included 1,352 students, 78% of whom were first-generation in college students. Students within their sample with similar GPAs who had mentors scored higher on the SAT than those without a mentor. Similarly, they found that students with mentors had an increased amount of motivation to attend college and anticipated a sense of belonging upon arrival (Woods & Preciado, 2016). Furthering the findings of Lopez (2018), regarding financial obligations causing the lower socioeconomic status student to drop out, Wood, Harrison, and Jones (2016) found from interviewing 28

working lower-income students who were struggling with obtaining a sense of belonging at work their feelings of discomfort on campus increased. Pichon (2016) studied 13 students, seven of whom came from a lower socioeconomic background that completed the transition from community college to a 4-year institution developed a sense of belonging in their earlier months of post-secondary education that carried through to their time during their university studies. Pichon attributed the successful transition to these students having a sense of belonging gained through their engagement in student activities (Pichon, 2016).

A study by Fink, McShay, and Hernandez (2016) on vertical transfers, students moving from community college to a 4-year university, researched the value of learning communities among these students. The sample size consisted of 50 students who originated their higher education at one of three community colleges and went on to enroll at the university. The learning community was organized to not only assist with curricular but also co-curricular activities. The goals of and subsequent research and evaluation of the program were to (a) aid students in the transition process as it related to the culture of a research institutions, (b) to invite students to participate in activities that offered them opportunities in leadership, and community engagement and (c) to encourage a sense of belonging within the campus environment. Survey results allowed the researchers to find that orientations were inadequate as they applied explicitly to transfer students. Community college students are often commuter students and continue to be such at the university. These students found it challenging to find activities that fit into their schedules. On a positive note, the wide variety of clubs, organizations, and non-

curricular activities were so vast that these transitioning students were able to find events in which to participate and that participation lent itself to improving their sense of belonging. Additionally, Fink et al. found that students who participated in the learning communities had more civic engagement.

A similar study by Thomas et al. (2018) regarded learning communities for transitioning students composed of 48 participants, all of whom were sociology majors, reported feelings of alienation, a lack of a sense of belonging, regarding being part of the campus, but also felt they did have a sense of belonging within their transitioning cohort, and the retention rate was 90%. Additional facets of this particular learning community could have affected this retention rate. Students were required to take part in a Summer Bridge program that focused on academics and course sequencing supervised by a collaboration between academic advising and members of the Sociology department (Thomas et al., 2018).

Alvarado and Guillermo-Wann (2015), in a study lasting 4-years at 34 different colleges and including 20,460 students, found that academic validation, interpersonal validation, as well as discrimination and bias, impacted a student's sense of belonging. In particular, academic validation, the support given from faculty that encourages students, and interpersonal validation, the welcoming of peers and others in campus activities, provided more contribution to a sense of belonging than discrimination and bias detracted. Hurtado et al. (2015) found that both academic validation and interpersonal communication were precursors to persistence in college. Students who reported bias but had both academic and interpersonal validation were more likely to remain in school.

Obstacles to a sense of belonging. Low-income community college students are among the least likely to continue to the completion of a bachelor's degree by comparison to their higher-income student peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Researchers have found many reasons that contribute to this problem. Large class sizes can hinder a sense of belonging between community college faculty and students. DeWine et al. (2017) delved into the experiences of 20 community college students who were taking classes at a 4-year institution and seeking to transition. The researchers had hoped to find what elements drove persistence. Their findings, beyond class sizes, included a need for students to recognize 4-year institutions as partners with students and the community college. Lower socioeconomic status students are more likely to be commuter students at a 4-year institution, and DeWine et al. also found that these students had a loss of belongingness when attempting to participate in campus events because students living on a campus dominated the population at such events. Involvement in on-campus events contributes to students' sense of belonging; therefore, a lack of participation detracts from their sense of belonging (Zhang & Ozuna, 2015).

Lower socioeconomic status students often find themselves at more of a disadvantage when developing the relationship with faculty by comparison to their more affluent cohorts (Smith & Lucena, 2016). In Smith and Lucena's (2016) study focusing on low-income STEM students, they found that the less advantaged student in this environment, due to their higher achievements academically before arriving at college, had less of a challenge belonging within their academic or social settings on campus (Smith & Lucena, 2016). However, the researchers also found that the lower

socioeconomic status student who did face challenges while trying to belong felt so due to the lower incomes earned by their families as compared to their more affluent cohorts. To collect their data, Smith and Lucena used ethnographic research over 18 months, examining 15 low-income, first-generation students enrolled in a STEM collegiate program (Smith & Lucena, 2016). Approximately 50% of baccalaureate recipients in STEM begin their education at a community college, but few are low-income students (Leggett-Robinson, Mooring, & Villa, 2015).

Also, in a multicentre and cross-sectional design, using a mixed methodology, researchers found that students who dropped out of nursing programs consistently lacked a sense of belonging while also having a decreased resilience (Van Hock, Portzky, & Franck, 2019). Further supported by Grobecker (2016), nursing students have benefitted from interventions focused on increasing their sense of belonging. Using The Perceived Stress Scale and The Belongingness Scale-Clinical Placement Experience, Grobecker's study was conducted with 1,296 nursing students and found that a sense of belonging contributed to perseverance and completion of the student's program and conversely that stress decreased the odds of achievement and impacted the student's self-efficacy (Grobecker, 2016).

Family too impacts a sense of belonging. However, students who are the first in their family to attend college from a lower socioeconomic background may not possess the level of commitment needed for positive college outcomes, nor may students have a feeling of accomplishment (Zembrodt, 2018). Lopez (2018) found by studying focus groups made up of 100 lower socioeconomic status students that students lacking a role

model from within their community but having a supportive home had an increased sense of belonging along with increased graduation rates. Lopez further found that students reported that as they increased their loan debt, their sense of belonging decreased, and they were more likely to drop-out. Students who did disengage from those within their community who were not supportive of their education but continued to persevere, obtained a sense of belonging in other ways, increasing their likelihood for student success (Rocoe, 2015).

While high-tech advances the learning process, high-touch affects a student's sense of belonging through relationships both on and off-campus (Felten, Gardner, Lambert, Schroeder, Barefoot, & Hrabowski, 2016). The environment on campus can be a compelling contributing factor to a student's sense of belonging, which in turn then plays a significant role in student endurance (Kirby, 2015). When faculty have engaged the classroom in student-centered pedagogy, then the natural occurrence of dialogue among students in the classroom facilitates the sense of belonging and adds to better student outcomes (Dwyer, 2017). Students who have interactions with faculty were found to have increased self-efficacy; which may have helped to establish a positive sense of belonging. That comfort level perceived by students then may allow students to seek out academic advising more willingly when a student does feel as if they belong their motivation to persist increases (Rennick, 2018).

Academic Advising

One of the significant factors that influence college success is academic advising (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016; Green, 2016; He & Hutson, 2016).

Academic advisors provide counseling to students within higher education, and it is that can be collaborative or directive throughout the advisor/student relationship that can have an impact, in part, to create successful student outcomes. Advisors help students in creating appropriate schedules, provide information to students regarding potential campus involvement, and available resources that can pave the way to a positive learning experience (Noaman & Ahmed, 2015). While academic advisors may be the experts regarding many matters involving the completion of assignments, courses, and degrees, they often also provide information on the transition process and point students in the direction of services that are non-academic when needed (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2018). The academic adviser can aid students in advancement toward their evolving goals (Walters, 2016).

Additionally, if students enter a community college with the intent or with enrollment into a program that transitions that student directly into a 4-year university the information given to students from the advisor is more critically needed as it can affect not just a 2-year degree but also impact the bachelor's degree. At times, academic advising for these transitional programs can even begin in high school (Sanchez, 2018).

The evolution of higher education has resulted in the development of various approaches to academic advising. Hart (2019), found that the community college students felt that academic advising was inadequate and when starting their higher education at community colleges, lower socioeconomic status students often did not understand the meaning or value of a certificate, associate degree, or an associate degree for transfer. Hart’s interviews with 45 students from four community colleges included complaints

that their schools canceled classes when enrollment had not met the required benchmark. These students were not informed until the day before classes started or at times when they showed up for the first day of the course, creating a frantic search for another class to take its place. Students also expressed a wish for advising on the campus for non-academic issues such as managing transportation, juggling two jobs while taking care of others at home, financial burdens, and more. These were all contributing factors that students felt could lead towards dropping out. Hart also found that academic advising augmented perseverance (Hart, 2019). Donalson et al. (2016) also found that low socioeconomic students who had personal struggles along with going to school expressed a need for evening and weekend access to academic advisers. The lack of necessary classes available to fit into the student's schedule created a prolonged time to degree completion, causing a higher attrition rate (Donaldson et al., 2016).

Successful outcomes from experiences at the community college have been attributed to dedicated faculty who contributed to the advice students received and added to a culture of cohesiveness (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016) interviewed 110 lower socioeconomic status students from three different community colleges, all of whom participated in a first year-experience program, and conducted three interviews with each student over 2 years. They found that first year-experience programs, which begin working with students before enrollment, typically in high school, by providing academic advising, made access to the community college smoother for students. The first year-experience program at these three schools also facilitated students receiving advice from a more holistic perspective as faculty and more

established students assisted. Interesting to note, however, is that after students left the first-year-experience program, at times to transition to a 4-year institution, they remarked that the quality of advising dropped (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016).

GPA has often been a determining factor that influences academic advising interventions according to Gershenfield et al. (2016), who studied low socioeconomic students' GPA as the predictor of graduation rates. They included 1,947 students from eight different community colleges with a low socioeconomic status (defined by the receipt of a Pell Grant). They found that students with higher GPAs in their first term had higher rates of graduation, while those with 2.33 or less were at a 47% chance of dropping out. Low socioeconomic students who were on probation during the study (GPA under 2.0) had the highest rate of dropping, requiring more involvement with academic advising. They found that the lack of intervention added not only to student failure, but also the continuation of less desirable outcomes through the student's life (Gershenfield et al., 2016). Government policy requires schools that accept federal funds to provide intervention if a student's GPA falls below 2.0 (Federal Student Aid, 2019). Gershenfield et al. (2016) found that the lack of intervention with students whose GPA was between the 2.0 and 2.33 levels added to students' failure rate, and concluded earlier intervention was necessary.

To what extent the institution will reach out to students is a matter for administrators to decide, and some higher education institutions require faculty to be involved in the advising of students. According to Shumaker and Wood (2016), institutions of higher learning can choose to be responsible for student success, or it is the

responsibility of students to discover how the institution can provide for their needs. Their study included 1,398 students from a high-transfer community college utilizing the Community College Success Measure (CCSM), a quantitative tool used to provide needs assessments. They found that non-traditional, low-income, and first-generation college students, Group A, utilized institutional services such as academic advising at the same rate as traditional, middle to high-income students, or Group B students. However, ease of access to services was hindered for Group A requiring greater tenacity on their part, due to their need to have more hours of employment, care for others at home, being dependent upon public transportation, and more. This lack of access provided a diminishing level of self-efficacy for those in Group A (Shumaker & Wood, 2016).

In a study completed at a Southeastern public university 15 first-generation college students who came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds took part in focus groups, and the researchers found that students felt they had to make many adjustments when starting college. The reported modifications included learning about one's self, academic changes, life balance, and self-care. Gibbons et al.'s (2019) study suggested that college counselors from high schools team up with academic advisers at colleges to proactively plan and present through joint effort workshops to support students on these issues, breaking them down into smaller topics. For example, academic adjustments could include workshops on time-management, study habits, and successful use of the library (Gibbons et al., 2019).

Webb, Dantzler and Hardy (2015) found in a study of community colleges in Alabama found that the 2008 transition rate from community college to 4-year

institutions was 3.7% while the national average was 22% (Webb, Dantzler, & Hardy, 2015) despite the placement of one additional academic adviser in each of 11 community colleges in the most impoverished communities in Alabama. These advisors reported that no single model used to advise students identified as potential transitioning students. Webb et al. (2015) noted that there was not a separate or specific approach to advising transfer students further noting that their unique needs may require a different style of advising.

In a study of 10 professors and 10 community college students who transitioned to a 4-year institution both students and faculty listed academic advising as a challenging aspect of progress toward students attaining a bachelor's degree. However, the researchers found that students exerted little effort to seek the assistance of faculty even during office hours. In this same study, participants reported that specialized orientation for transfer students in which they participated assisted in a smooth transition (DeWine et al., 2017).

Similarly, in a study that included 35 students who transferred from community college to a 4-year institution in Michigan, Flaga (2006) heard students report that the most useful tool in their transition process was an orientation that was designed just for community college transfer students. Students at the Michigan university reported in their second term that the events held at their community colleges by the university made their transition smoother. Administrators at the university reported that by investing in the training of the community college's staff about the admissions requirements, student life at the university, and more also added to the success of the recruiting events (Flaga,

2006). More students are transitioning from community colleges to 4-year institutions, and this increase has been for at least a decade (Fincher et al., 2017; Fink et al., 2016). Academic advising has an impact on attrition, even more so as applied to the first few weeks of school (Hatch & Garcia, 2017). Donaldson et al. (2016) found that motivation and the desire to persist is high during the early stages of matriculating at a community college and that the more frequent involvement students have with the adviser, the higher the likelihood exists of students remaining.

A recent study by Scott et al. (2017) at a regional public university where 38% of the student population was comprised of community college transfer students examined an approach to academic advising that utilized a combination of intrusive and developmental methods. The school had implemented a transfer student learning community available to students broken down by majors. Students in the transfer learning community were required to meet with an assigned advisor before commencing classes at the 4-year institution. Advisors made contact with students using the intrusive approach, reaching out to students often and on a variety of subjects. Meetings with students followed a more of a developmental approach. The adviser and student collaborated to ensure that the major students had chosen is indeed the best fit based on a holistic view of the student's life, passions, and ambitions. Advising meetings are also required during the first, second, and third semesters. During these advising sessions, the advisor and student examined the student's strengths, seeking to eventually come to an agreement that the student was on the correct path. Students were asked to prepare themselves for academic advising meetings and received information informing them what will be covered during

their session to facilitate their readiness. But just as students needed to be prepared, so did the adviser. Smith and Allen (2018) found that a prepared adviser who had access to specific tools resulted in students conveying a sense of satisfaction with the institution's advising department. These tools included handbooks about the institution's policies, a how-to manual to help the adviser match student need to the advising model, regularly scheduled meetings with other advisers, and leadership within advising to continually develop best practices (Smith & Allen, 2018). Their findings came from studying 22,000 students across nine different Michigan institutions. With specific reference to community college students transitioning to a 4-year university, Smith and Lucena (2016) found that the more accurately informed a student was about the requirements to successfully transition, the higher their satisfaction level was with academic advising. Smith and Allen (2018) had students rate their levels of satisfaction with advising in three different areas: understanding how things work at their institution and how they will work at the school they transition to, understanding connections that will facilitate their transition, and knows requirements they, students, will have to meet in order to transition successfully.

Intrusive advising. Community college students have often relied on themselves or peers for academic advice, even when choosing classes (Donaldson et al., 2016). Asking in-depth questions of 12 first-term community college students and utilizing a case study method, Donaldson et al. (2016) found that an intrusive academic advising program, where the adviser is proactive in reaching out to students, increased student participation in academic advising. Donaldson et al. further found that having an assigned

adviser as opposed to a pool of advisers who work with the next student was perceived by students to have helped build a relationship between academic advising and students. Using the intrusive advising model created a need for advisers to understand student autonomy better and to be skilled planners to make the best use of the student's time while advising (Donaldson et al., 2016). An intrusive advising method is not only proactive but also motivates and provides at-risk students with a more connected experience in making decisions about the course of their studies (Rodgers, Blunt, & Trible, 2014). Students with the least amount of exposure to higher education may reap the most benefits from an intrusive advising approach (Schneider, Sasso, & Puchner, 2017). The intrusive adviser reaches out to students on more than course selection, including being involved with student attendance and grades not just at the end of a term but throughout a course and providing direction to acquiring library skills, tutoring, and other campus services (Thomas et al., 2018). Donaldson et al. (2016) found that intrusive advising helped create and build a relationship between student and adviser in the early weeks of school. Their findings showed that motivation and the desire to persist was high during the early stages of matriculating at a community college and that the more frequent involvement with the adviser the more likely the student's motivation was to continue. Academic advising has an impact on retention, particularly when applied to the first few weeks of school potentially setting the trend for the terms to follow (Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Xu, Xing, & Van der Sharr, 2016).

Intrusive advising uses many tools to provide information to students. When phone calls were supplemented with text messages to remind first-year students to renew

their financial aid, it was found to have an improvement to retention (Baker, Bettinger, Jacob, & Marinescu, 2018; Castleman & Meyer, 2016). Synchronous virtual meetings, analytical software that warns the adviser of at-risk behaviors, and the use of social media are some of the other tools used by intrusive advisers to reach students early enough and in a way that is convenient for students to potentially alter a negative student outcome into a positive one (Green, 2016; Jones & Hansen, 2014; Poole, 2015).

Davidson and Blankenship (2017) in a longitudinal study ranging from 2005-2012 containing a sample of 172,827 students, found that momentum in the first 2 years of college, particularly at community college, was a predictor of success when a student transitioned to a 4-year institution. Taking too few credits (less than 12), or too many credits (more than 18), could set students up for failure. Based on that information, they found that intrusive academic advising provided the intervention necessary to keep students on the best track toward graduation by keeping their momentum consistent (Davidson & Blankenship, 2017).

In a study completed at a 4-year residential college with a student population of over 27,000, including 3,213 participating first-time degree-seeking students, one-quarter of the participants came from low-income families. The researchers, Stewart, Lim, and Kim (2015) found that academic intervention did effect pre-college academic deficiencies in a positive way, and they noted that academic advising for first-year students assisted in student success. However, in this study measures of academic intervention came from students reaching out to advisors rather than the intrusive advising method. Stewart et al. found expectations for receiving academic advice were primarily the responsibility of the

student. For the lower socioeconomic student, the earlier intrusive academic advising is integrated with their attendance at college, the better. Anxiety-related to academic and career choices can cause stress that diminishes academic results. Proper academic advising can help students choose a major that coincides with their career aspirations (Pulliam & Sasso, 2016).

Prescriptive advising. Other models for academic advising, in addition to intrusive advising, include, as described by He and Hutson (2016) the prescriptive, developmental, and advising-as-teaching approaches. The prescriptive method is the most common. In this approach, the adviser, as the expert, dispenses information regarding classes, sequencing, and services offered by the institution (He & Hutson, 2016; Harris, 2018). This process typically involves a one-way flow of information from the adviser to students and is not seen as collaborative. As technology advances and more students become comfortable with receiving the information delivered through prescriptive advising via online resources, there is less of a need for the prescriptive adviser (He & Hutson, 2016). This method more often relies on students seeking out the academic advising department, and then students see an adviser by appointment only or during open office hours. Because of the revolving door atmosphere of this method, students may never see the same adviser twice, and this does not build a relationship between adviser and student (Harris, 2018).

Henry Ford is known for having said: “If you think you can or if you think you can’t, you’re right.” Self-efficacy promotes student success in higher education (Bandura, 1997, 2004; Schneider & Preckel, 2017). Bolkan, Pedersen, Stormes, and Manke (2018)

posited as a result of research findings that it is the academic adviser who has the most indirect impact on whether students thinks they can or thinks they can't (Bolkan et al., 2018). Bolkan et al. (2018) studied the results of surveys answered by 292 students, of which 221 identified themselves as minorities, and found that prescriptive advising provided positive student outcomes when the advisers suggested more than usual course loads to students with higher levels of self-efficacy, as determined by the advisor through their one-on-one interviews. The addition of more than typical classes per term increased the number of students completing their degree in 4 years. Furthermore, Bolkan et al. (2018) found that students taking part in this study were committed to graduating on time and wanted to enter a career for which their education would contribute. Therefore, these students found the prescriptive approach to academic advising worked best by keeping them on track to graduate in the least amount of time (Bolkan et al., 2018).

Developmental advising. The developmental model looks at students from a holistic point of view, assisting with student growth both academically, socially, mentally, and emotionally (He & Hutson, 2016). Advisers, since they are taking into consideration the entire student in this model, help set goals, assist with decision making and problem-solving issues, career choices, and psychological advancement (Harris, 2018). The developmental academic adviser listens intently and engages students with practical communication skills, which builds rapport (McGill, 2016). Harris' (2018) study included 77 students, all of whom were exposed to both developmental and prescribed academic advising approaches. Each student submitted two statements for 14 questions, one describing their experience with prescriptive advising and the other

statement regarding developmental advising. The answers were analyzed, and 87% of the students were receiving developmental advising, while 13% were working with advisors using the prescriptive method. Harris hypothesized that students preferred developmental advising. However, the findings resulted in a rejection of that hypothesis. It should be noted that both questions provided answers that showed some level of satisfaction in both advising approaches, and no clear preference was identified (Harris, 2018).

In another study, Hamed and Hussin (2015) surveyed 111 undergraduates about their academic advising experiences. Similar to Harris' (2018) study, 83.8% stated that their academic advisor used a developmental approach; however, 72.1% preferred the developmental approach, while in Harris' study there was no preference. 97.3% of all students queried responded with satisfaction with their academic advising experiences (Hamed & Hussin, 2015).

Nkomo (2018) conducted a study that included 46 academic advisors and over 54% responded that they did not receive any specialized training in developmental advising. Nkomo's research focused on how academic advising affected careers for students. From the pool of participants, 94.5% reported that they felt career guidance was or should be part of their job, and 72.9% reported specific incidents when students needed more career advice than the advisor could provide (Nkomo, 2018). According to the findings from a study by McGill (2016), as a student proceeds through college, they enter with a higher amount of enthusiasm about their potential careers than when they graduate, creating a need for career advising for all students.

Advising-as-teaching. A student's belief in their ability to affect their academic outcomes or academic self-efficacy is just one of the ingredients needed for successful student outcomes, and academic advising can fuel self-efficacy (Bolkan et al., 2018). The advising-as-teaching model is part of the pedagogical environment of the classroom. A progressive lesson plan for competency-based learning includes clear objectives, standards for performance, input from the instructor, modeling, checking for understanding, guided and independent practice; and these elements are also included in the advising-as-teaching model (Walters, 2016). When Johnson, Walther, and Medley (2018) asked 19 academic advisors in honors programs about their experiences in advising, Johnson et al. found that when the advisor used the advising-as-teaching model for honors students, the adviser adapted their approach to match the pedagogy used in the honors classroom.

Further, there were common elements that the advisers were committed to, such as, providing a one-stop-shop service, assisting with the development of the student's network, and helping students identify others as members of their support system (Johnson et al., 2018). Faculty often see advising-as-teaching as the most advantageous method of providing academic advice recognizing the pedagogical similarities between teaching and advising; in fact, many professors note that advising is teaching (McGill, 2016). At the same time, faculty do not, in many cases, have the time to give the advising themselves. Technology and training programs are being developed to utilize advising as teaching as a method for dispensing information targeted at the academic adviser (Gates, Miller, & Givens-Voler, 2016; Kalamkarian & Karp, 2017).

Academic Preparedness

Successful completion of a college degree or the successful transition from community college to the 4-year university can be positively affected by the readiness of the student for the collegiate experiences they are about to endure (Gershenfield et al., 2016). While the focus of this study is on the transition of the lower socioeconomic status student from community college to the 4-year institution, researchers have found that the experiences of the transition from high school to community college can impact student preparedness for further transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

Arrival at the community college. Academic preparedness is composed of critical thinking skills and reading, writing, and math readiness to complete introductory college classes (Mac Iver, Mac Iver, & Clark, 2019). Lower socioeconomic status students often arrive at community college unprepared (Johnson, 2017; Le et al., 2016). If students do arrive prepared, they have higher attrition rates and are less likely to transition to the 4-year institution (Le et al., 2016; Sadowski et al., 2018). Gaps in the preparedness of students for college are often created by race and income inequality, generating an uneven playing field even before the first day of classes (Coomer-Cox, 2019; Kodama, Han, Moss, Myers, & Farruggia, 2018). Winograd et al. (2018) studied 1,085 students, all of whom came from a lower socioeconomic background. Less prepared students entering community college were from lower-income families and had graduated from lower-performing high schools often leaving them unprepared for their first year at the community college. Unprepared students from low-income families have

the least likelihood of all students in obtaining a bachelor's degree and more often struggle academically (Winograd et al., 2018).

Students wanting to attend college also want to be prepared, but far too often their understanding of not being prepared comes in their senior year of high school, and this can be too late requiring them to take pre-college classes after high school graduation (Herman, Scanlan, & Cameron, 2017). Herman et al. (2017) performed a study comprised of 1,141 students seeking an associate degree at a community college who were not prepared in either English, math or both. Pre-college courses in English were taken by 80% of the sample, and 91% took developmental math classes. These students were followed for 4 years, whether they continued in college or not. Failure of a pre-college course for these students predicted a higher rate of attrition. The researchers concluded that when in high school, these students took on average 4 years of English and 3 years of math, and the result was a lack of preparedness. However, these classes have still left many unprepared for college-level classes. They suggested an investigation into the content of the high school curriculum (Herman et al., 2017).

While lack of preparedness is often linked to skills in math and English, students who are not ready for college also have demonstrated a deficiency in understanding of the expectations in a college classroom, schedules, attentiveness to school policies, and the overall condition or quality of academic submissions (Coomer-Cox, 2019). Coomer-Cox (2019) recruited 27 students who answered 56 open-ended questions and then broken down into focus groups. The participants were considered underrepresented and unprepared, but not unprepared from an academic standpoint. Their lack of preparedness

was broken down into themes that included: connections, motivation and support, accountability, studying, college expectations, life lessons, academic help, belonging, and the overall transitioning experience. Six other themes also were identified but did not have repeated or saturated findings: unfamiliarity with the campus, mental health, cultural differences, financial aid, campus life in general, and feeling outside of their comfort zone. Coomer-Cox found that students were not advised in high school or during orientation about these aspects of their new life as they transition into college. College preparedness is not only a predictor of successful student outcomes but can also affect the sense of belonging once students arrive on campus. Further, the lack of preparedness (whether it be academic preparedness or preparedness for life in college) can also then diminish the life goals of an individual (Strayhorn, 2009).

One of the reasons given by researchers for low socioeconomic students being more unprepared for college is simply a lack of information (Franko, 2017; Green, 2016; Stewart et al., 2015). Circumstances that affect their lack of preparedness include aspects of the community, inadequate levels of quality high schools, a need to balance work and study, and issues at home. All contribute to a student's lack of understanding or misunderstanding of how to navigate the complexities of access to college, and particularly financial aid (Pichon, 2016). The lack of know-how regarding access and financial assistance to get into and pay for college often leaves lower socioeconomic status students, even if they do find a school to go to and start college, with feelings of inadequacy. Their more financially stable cohorts seem to know more about financial aid, and this lack of knowledge can provide students with a sense of failure (Pichon, 2016;

Stevens & Kirst, 2015). Having access to financial aid, especially grants, has been found to lower the stress for unprepared students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as it can reduce work hours and thereby contribute to better student outcomes (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). Receiving lower amounts of financial aid due to a lack of understanding the application process has also contributed to the lower socioeconomic student's lower retention rates in at least one study (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). In light of the financial challenges that low socioeconomic students have in attending college, even the less expensive community college, those who would be eligible to receive Pell Grants have sometimes not filed for the grant or other aid only due to a lack of understanding (Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2015).

Financial aid or the lack thereof may also come to affect the community college. Recently, Texas refined its state grants for college students to be awarded based on academic performance (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017). In a longitudinal study that included 5,880 at-risk students in Texas, McKinney and Hagedorn (2017) found that between 2007 and 2013, 72% of these students were required to take pre-college classes. McKinney and Hagedorn provided several potential assumptions while predicting the future of the performance-based awards. One question raised in the discussion of the study that amounted to whether community colleges will begin to attract higher-performing students who will more likely receive the performance-based aid. This may unintentionally leave the lower socioeconomic status student who comes from a poor performing high school, without the opportunity that community colleges typically offer this part of the population (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017).

Mac Iver et al. (2019) studied a program in Texas known at CRIS, College Readiness Indicator System. This is an early intervention program that begins in middle school and helps students through high school graduation. The threefold program addresses academic preparation, academic tenacity, and college knowledge as it prepares a student by exposing them to the campus environment, allowing them to be more comfortable with the transitioning process. Academic preparation needs involvement from students and teachers (Pierce, 2016). Academic tenacity tends to be developed with students led by counselors, as does college knowledge (Mac Iver et al., 2019).

In a study that included 134 faculty members and 40 academic advisors, the researchers found that the more unprepared the student, the more the need for intrusive academic advising. Among the faculty, 48.6% concluded that interaction with academic advisors with underprepared students strongly benefited student outcomes and 45.8% of faculty felt that intrusive advising was the path to higher grades for underprepared students and the balance of those surveyed were neutral or undecided (Schneider, Passo, & Puncher, 2017).

Summer Bridge programs have proven to be successful in boosting lower socioeconomic status students ' level of preparedness (Kodama et al., 2018), and have also provided a smoother transition from their high school experience into the community college environment (Arnold et al., 2015). The objective of the pre-college coursework is to move students into credit-bearing classes that will ultimately create or increase momentum to reach graduation (Kodama et al., 2018). These programs usually begin several weeks before the fall term starts and can be intense as the programs focus not

only on catching students up academically but also preparing them for the collegiate culture (Cooper, Ashley, & Brownell, 2017). Summer Bridge programs provide a launchpad that propels the unprepared student toward graduation (Strayhorn, 2015; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015). Continued assistance with time-management, study habits, and tutoring is essential to keep students prepared for the rigors of higher academic study (Slade et al., 2015). Low socioeconomic students who graduate from high school and begin college may do so with a lack of preparedness caused by, among other things, "summer melt." This term refers to the loss of enthusiasm during the summer after high school (Rall, 2016).

Arnold et al. (2015) found that schools offering Summer Bridge programs help to avoid or deescalate the loss of enthusiasm. They also found that many of these programs help students with financial aid, provide orientations geared toward this population, and becoming more familiar with the campus and the colleges' expectations (Arnold et al., 2015). Lower socioeconomic status students who actively participated in a Summer Bridge program benefited academically and had an increase in their sense of belonging. Kimbark, Peters, and Richardson (2017) provided evidence to that claim through a study of 432 students at a community college who answered surveys on the topic and of whom 192 needed pre-college classes. 99% of students in preparatory classes proceeded to the second term while 94.9% of those who did not need the courses continued. In the third term, 60% of students in the college prep classes remained while only 56% of students considered college-ready continued. GPA for the two groups also varied. 67% of students who started in college prep classes had between a 2.0 and a 4.0 while only 30% of

students who did not take these classes had the same GPA. The final quantitative finding showed that 72% of engaged students, those participating in extracurricular activities came from the group that required college prep classes (Kimbark et al., 2017). Students from the college prep group also perceived they had higher levels of communication with their friends and teachers. Students in the pre-college coursework also were observed to have a higher mastery of time management, note-taking, and decision making (Kimbark et al., 2017).

Stewart et al.'s (2015) study of 332 students who required remedial coursework, found a different effect for students in pre-college classes: 60.5% of students continued with their education after five terms. For students who were not required to take remedial courses, 73.2% persisted after five terms. Notably, therefore, 39.5% of those who took remedial courses left between the first and the fifth term, while 26.2% of those who did not take remedial courses also left school early (Stewart et al., 2015). Based on these findings, the researchers concluded that prepared students were more likely to persist for more extended periods in their post-secondary education.

Arrival at the 4-year university. Many community college students are surprised that not all their earned college credits from the will transfer with them to the 4-year institution (Hodara, Marinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2016; Taylor, 2019). Articulation agreements that acknowledge coursework taken at one school that will transfer into another school are often misunderstood even by staff at both the community college and the 4-year institution (Taylor, 2019). Taylor (2019) found that students did not understand 93% of these agreements and that 69% of the articulation agreements

were written at a 16th-grade level (Taylor, 2019). These articulation agreements can be the foundation for community college students deciding which classes to take to make their transition more successful and building a strong relationship between community colleges and 4-year institutions with understandable articulations agreements facilitates more students transitioning (Xu et al., 2018). Deficiencies in transfer and transitional policies between community colleges and 4-year institutions, especially for lower socioeconomic status students who frequently rely on the community college as the starting point requires improvement (Taylor & Jain, 2017).

In a study that included 30 underrepresented students from Texas, Tennessee, and Washington, researchers found that when community college students transition to a 4-year university, they were all too often surprised by the lack of transfer credits. Some lost credits due to choosing a major and finding that the courses at the community college would not apply to the major or fit into electives (Hodara et al., 2016). Monaghan and Attewell (2015) included 4,050 students who transitioned from community college to a 4-year institution in a study and found that 14% of these students only had 10% of their accumulated credits accepted upon entering the university. Some 58% successfully transferred 90% or more of their community college credits. The remaining 28% of students who transitioned lost between 10% and 89% of their accumulated credits. A striking finding in their study found that community college transition students completed their bachelor's degrees in roughly the same time and the same percentages as those students who began their education at the 4-year institution (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

Scott et al. (2017) researched a learning community established in Texas, a voluntary Summer Bridge program called "Academic Boot Camp." This program is not only for students who are considered unprepared, but for those wishing to become more prepared as they transition from community colleges. Participants sit in cohorts based on their major; research shows this begins to build a sense of belonging. Scott et al.'s study included 100 students admitted for a fall term and 30 for the spring term and followed the content and results of this preparedness program. Commencing on Friday before classes start with a 3-hour session that included three 20-minute presentations from current students, many of whom will be mentors to the new students. The mentors explained their own transition experience, their plans for graduation, and a breakdown of a typical week. The next hour was spent on instruction regarding time management, attendance, engagement, and available resources. The last hour covers basics to success in each class, such as reading and becoming entirely familiar with syllabi and preparing for exams. Students were strongly advised to create an electronic planner and to work with their mentors on setting time-sensitive goals. The boot camp continued for 3 months with a monthly meeting, but students met with their mentors as needed. GPA among the participants rose 20% with an average GPA at the end of their first year of 2.92.

Attewell, Heil, and Reisel (2012) compared 2,570 transcripts and found that momentum was a contributing factor to college completion. Students entering their second year who took less than 12 credits or more than 18 completed their degree approximately 7.5% less often than other students. When students complete their first year at a community college, they are more likely to continue to graduation. In a

longitudinal study consisting of 1,800 students who began their freshman year at a community college in 2006. 62.6% that completed their first year continued to the second year (DeNicco, Harrington, & Fogg, 2015).

Summary

Some argue that success in life is based largely on education, and the ability to access and complete higher education can be based on the zip code in which a person is born (Burris & Hacker, 2017; Luc, Hendrickx, & de Montjoye, 2019). The three characteristics referred to above, a sense of belonging, academic advising, and preparedness, all seem to converge in a circle with one pointing influence on the other and all providing a deficit reaction for the lower socioeconomic student.

Lower socioeconomic status students arrive at community college with a lowered sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), by comparison to other students. These students are less likely to seek out assistance from the academic advising department (Gonzales, Brammer, & Sawilowsky, 2015; Storlie, Mostade, & Duenyas, 2016). Less interaction with an adviser not only can diminish student outcomes but can also contribute to the lack of a sense of belonging, both of which make continuing in college from the first year to the second more challenging (Donaldson et al., 2016). If any student, regardless of their financial status, arrives at college unprepared, they are less likely to continue and complete their higher education. The impact of coming from a low socioeconomic background, due to many variables, increases the chances of these underrepresented students arriving at community college less prepared than is usually expected (Mac Iver et al., 2019; Sadowski et al., 2018). Low socioeconomic students can have an increased

chance of a successful transition high school to community college and ultimately to a 4-year university from the community college to obtain a bachelor degree if they have a greater sense of belonging, receive academic advising suited toward their needs, and are better prepared for a higher education (Conefrey, 2018).

While many studies have separately had findings on a student's sense of belonging, the academic advising approaches, or college preparedness, this study uniquely fills the gap in the existing research by researching the experiences specifically of the lower socioeconomic status student in relationship to all three elements simultaneously. Understanding the lower socioeconomic student's experience with relation to these three key elements may provide an understanding that can affect future policy to secure improved student outcomes.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to increase the understanding of the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students as they transition from community college to a 4-year university. Data collection took place at a community college with a feeder relationship with a prominent 4-year university in the Southeast. The feeder relationship is guided by a program that allows a student to enroll at the community college and transition to the university upon the receipt of an associate's degree.

In this chapter, I present my research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, and my methodology, all of which, when combined with my literature review, helped create the interview questions I asked to understand student experiences. I also address the logic behind the number of participants, the trustworthiness of the responses, and the ethical issues involved with the study.

Research Design and Rationale

I used a basic qualitative approach (Creswell, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016) while conducting interviews with lower socioeconomic status students, asking open-ended questions that allowed the students to expand their answers beyond yes and no about their individual experiences. Quantitative studies abound regarding low socioeconomic student access, retention, and completion. Through my review of existing research, I concluded that a qualitative design would best provide me with a closer understanding of students'experiences by asking open-ended questions that are grounded in research within the framework used throughout the study. Through this

design, I wanted to find the experiences and relationships these students have that have influenced their sense of belonging, their interactions with academic advising, and their academic preparedness. The basic qualitative approach of asking open-ended questions allows participants to expand on their answers. (Patton, 2015).

Because case studies typically explore a single phenomenon in a bounded setting with access to multiple types of data (Creswell, 1994), I dismissed the case study as the best potential approach for this project. While I was studying students' transitions as a phenomenon, I attempted, in particular, to find the effects of a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness on that transitioning process. Patton (2015) supported this type of pragmatic research in a basic design approach. Similarly, I did not choose an ethnographic approach because I was not confident that lower socioeconomic status constitute a discrete group that could be easily identified for study. An argument could be made, perhaps, that low socioeconomic status does qualify as a "cultural group," which is a component of an ethnography, but this approach would likely have required my witnessing of students in the campus and even home settings, which would be challenging to justify ethically and may not have addressed my research question.

Research Question

RQ: What are the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness during the transitioning process from community college to a 4-year university?

Role of the Researcher

I was the only researcher in this study. The institutional review board (IRB) at the partnering community college provided me with approval to perform research with the conditions that I disclosed my intentions for soliciting participants and how I identified low socioeconomic students and ensured that they have at least one term at the community college so that they could provide information on prior experiences. Following the guidelines set by my certification from the National Institute of Health, U.S. Federal guidelines, and approval of the community college and Walden University, I proceeded with the highest ethical standards.

I personally attended the community college in the study more than 12 years ago. During the time I attended classes, a transition program to a 4-year university did not exist. I am not a member of any alumni group, nor have I visited the campus since my graduation. Therefore, I bring no bias to this research, and I have no relationships with faculty or staff from the community college. I am not aware of anyone currently attending the community college. If a potential participant came forward and there was any relationship between us, no matter how slight, the candidate would not have been considered for the study.

Methodology

In this section, I describe the methodology I employed for my study. I address the setting, participant selection, the data collection process, instrumentation, and how I analyzed the data.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The area within a 5-mile radius around the community college is predominantly upper-middle-class, yet the county in which the campus is located is economically diverse. Over 90% of the student body is receiving some sort of financial aid, and just under 65% receive Pell Grants. The participants were drawn from this population through a recruiting process I initiated.

I obtained approval for the study from the cooperating institution's review board, and then submitted the IRB application to Walden University, indicating that Walden would not be the IRB of record. Instead, the community college was the IRB of record. Once I received Walden's formal recognition of the local IRB of record and approval for my research (Walden IRB approval number 11-07-19-0674604), I commenced with recruiting participants.

I placed recruiting posters around the community college campus to solicit participants. In addition, as part of the recruitment plan, I placed the same announcement on the student activities and student employment opportunity pages of the school's website and in the campus newspaper. The poster and announcement asked students to contact me by phone, text, or e-mail to express their interest in participating. The posters and announcements specified that respondents must be over 18, receiving a Pell Grant, and completed at least 12 credits at the campus. (A Pell Grant is part of U.S. federal financial aid provided to students based on financial need.)

Data Collection

I scheduled a one-time, face-to-face, audio-recorded interview with those who responded with an interest in participating and who signed the consent form. Face-to-face interview dates and times were chosen by the student to provide a comfort level that accommodated their schedule. It is important to allow the student to choose the day and time of the interview, as their economic status is likely to include employment or other obligations in addition to studies, and my schedule is flexible. It was made clear that at least 45 minutes, but less than 60 minutes, would be needed for the interview. I audio recorded the interviews, transcribed them and returned each transcribed interview to the participant for their review and comments. In addition, I took field notes during the interview process to record any important context for each interview.

As part of my data collection plan, I asked the community college to provide an unoccupied office with a desk and two chairs. Both chairs were of the same height and on the same side of the desk to standardize the interview setup. During the interviews, I used my cell phone and the Android app Voice Recorder.

For each interview, I transcribed a copy of the audio within a few days and e-mailed it to the student, asking that they review the transcription and share any corrections or additional thoughts with me. During each interview, one file folder was in the room that contained the student's signed informed consent and my interview questions (see Appendix). During the interview, the list of questions and probes were removed from the file for me to follow. In order to minimize the participants' distraction, I occasionally took notes to remind me of body language. Immediately after each

student's departure, I took notes in my field journal expanding on the student's inferences and any other information I perceived as relevant to the student's answers. At the conclusion of each interview, the participant was given a $25 Visa gift card. All students agreed that if necessary, they would participate in follow-up interviews. As analysis began of the data gathered from the initial interviews it became evident that the follow up interviews would add to the trustworthiness of the findings. I completed all these follow-up interviews, each about 30 minutes, by phone.

Instrumentation

The instrument for this study was a self-designed protocol with interview questions reviewed by my committee (see Appendix). I asked each participant the same questions, following the protocol. All the questions asked were open-ended, allowing the participant to expand on their experiences, and I often requested, through probes, that they to expand on their answer, as indicated in the protocol.

The questions in the interview protocol were influenced by the conceptual framework for this study. For example, Strayhorn (2008, 2012, 2016) asked questions of students regarding their sense of belonging, and I constructed my questions based on Strayhorn's findings. Prior research, as well as the questions used during interviews from the research of Donaldson et al. (2016), Harris (2018), Johnson et al. (2018), Mac Iver et al. (2019), and Sadowski et al. (2018) influenced the academic advising questions I used in my study. Findings from Coomer-Cox (2019), Mac Iver et al. (2019), Sadowski et al. (2018), and Taylor (2019) guided my creation of questions regarding academic preparedness. Finally, the questions I created regarding the student's experience with

transition were grounded in the work of Schlossberg et al. (1995) and Anderson et al. (2012). An additional influence on the questions came from my committee chair, prior professor instruction, and mock interviews performed with family and friends who did not participate in the study.

Data Analysis

I performed analysis of the data in consultation with my dissertation committee. I inserted notes from my field journal into the transcription regarding tone, expression, and any other influencing factors deemed appropriate. Once I completed an accurate portrayal of the interview on paper and this was reviewed by each participant, I manually coded the transcripts into an MS Excel spreadsheet and identified categories and themes evident across the transcripts (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2014). I anticipated that codes and categories would emerge during the coding process with some overlapping characteristics, which I then mapped to create themes and subthemes.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The information and data gathered through the interview process must be considered trustworthy. There are four characteristics of trustworthy qualitative research I will address: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Credibility

I followed the instruction given by Terrell (2016) to establish credibility in my study through engagement with my student participants lasting through the in-person interview, plus any prior contact made as part of the recruiting process. Each student

initiated first contact with me in reply to one of the forms of solicitation already mentioned. I gathered their contact information, qualified that they met the requirements for the study, and identified days and times that we could hold the interviews. I limited my bias in the interpretation of the data gathered, as previously mentioned, by assuring that I had an accurate transcription of the interview. Further delineation of bias came through consultation with my dissertation committee. Finally, I gave each participant a copy of the transcript, asking them for verification as to the accuracy of the interview before data analysis began.

Dependability

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) used consistency as a measure of dependability. I suspected that I could obtain information during the answers to the open-ended questions that exceeded the boundaries of a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness. This information added to verifying the authenticity of the answers provided by the participants. Some students' answers required probing questions to assist in the full understanding of their original answer.

Transferability

At its core, transferability refers to the presentation of details within the study so that the reader can fully comprehend the way in which the researcher conducted the interviews. This allows the reader to trust that the participants' answers are described in depth without any bias. To maintain transferability, I described what I know of my participants from the interview with some detail, which expands on the understanding of their answers and adds to the understanding of their experiences. The overall

trustworthiness of the answers from participants also influenced transferability. It may prove useful to identify potential future research from trustworthiness as it pertains to transferability (Soldana, 2014).

Confirmability

First, and above all, I held to my role as the researcher described above. I accepted that total objectivity is not achievable in qualitative research. However, through assistance from my dissertation committee, along with my best efforts, I attempted to remain as unbiased as possible. Prior research, the methodological framework, the construction of my questions, and the repetitive review of my interviews confirmed my avoidance of influencing any findings, which are characteristics of confirmability as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016). I will maintain all data gathered from the audio recordings, transcriptions, edits to those transcriptions made for accurate reporting, field journal notes, and Excel spreadsheets in safe storage under my control for five years.

Ethical Procedures

As a qualitative researcher, I abided by the oath of many who have come before me to do no harm. Participants, schools, and other entities as necessary will remain confidential to the reader. I had IRB approval from the site where I gathered my data. Upon approval of this proposal, I submitted the IRB approval from the institution of record to Walden University's IRB. I obtained signed consent forms approved by both IRBs from all participants. I included all aspects of the interview process— from the design of the questions, to the recording mechanisms, review of those recordings, transcriptions, review, and coding of the transcriptions—in the IRB applications and all

aspects were also cleared through the members of my dissertation committee. Through the development of the professional relationship I have had with my chair, I was able to conduct this study with ethical standards at the forefront of my project.

Summary

I gathered information from interviews of students who come from a lower socioeconomic background who are attending a community college in the Southeast with the intent of transitioning to a 4-year university in the same region with regard to their experiences as they pertain to a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness. These students were participating in and enrolled in a feeder program designed to assist them in a smooth transition. Before and during my interviews, I built a rapport with the students as part of improving the trustworthiness of the responses received. My committee chair indirectly supervised the entire process of my field research. The goal of answering the research questions in an ethical manner guided every aspect of the field research.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to answer the single research question: What are the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness during the transitioning process from community college to a 4-year university? During the interview process I learned more about the transition process than expected, which I captured in the findings.

In this chapter, I describe the study's setting, participants, data collection, analysis techniques, analysis of data, and a summary of the steps used to provide trustworthiness while analyzing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I then present the findings regarding students' sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness. Finally, this chapter ends with a summary of the results.

Study Setting

SCC (alias) is in the Southeastern region of the United States. There are more than 25,000 students enrolled across one main campus and a few satellites. The main campus occupies over 200 acres of land with lush landscaping. The school offers more than 90 majors for the associate degree, 60 plus trade certificates, more than 15 career certificates, along with adult education for students studying English as a second language, the GED, and many continuing education programs. Of the total student population, about three-fourths of the students take courses on the main campus. The college also offers online courses within some programs as well as hybrid classes. A program called Smooth Transition (alias) allows students to move from one of several community colleges to SU (alias), a nearby 4-year institution. In this study, I focused on

students at SCC, one of the several community colleges that feed SU, home to nearly 70,000 students and offering over 200 majors. According the SU website, about 65% of the students who transition from community college with financial aid originate from SCC.

The Smooth Transition program allows a student to obtain an associate degree from the community college and to then seamlessly transition to SU with guaranteed admission upon completion of the associate degree, requiring in most cases the accumulation of 60 credits, and in all cases at least a 2.0 GPA. The program requires a student be enrolled in Smooth Transition by the time they have accumulated 30 credits. However, students can sign up for Smooth Transition upon enrollment into the community college. While SCC maintains open enrollment, SU's freshmen scored, on average, 1350 on their SAT, had a high school GPA of 3.8, and graduated in the top 10% of their class.

Participant Recruitment

The community college's office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research served as the IRB of record with Walden University's IRB permission under IRB approval form number 11-07-19-0674604. I implemented a poster campaign to attract potential participants. The posters specified the following criteria for participation and offered a gift of $25 for participation: 18 years of age or older, have 12 or more completed credits from SCC, be currently enrolled, will be moving to a 4-year university, and receiving a Pell grant. I felt that having completed 12 credits at SCC would provide a pool of students who had enough experiences as a student to respond to the interview

questions. Federal financial aid through receipt of a Pell grant has been used by prior researchers to determine if a student was a low-income student. Pell grants are awarded based on family income, the lower the income, the higher the Pell grant capping at the time of this study at $6,195.

Thirty-five posters were placed by a work-study student who attempted to place them where students congregate on the main campus, and 15 were placed across three satellites. Over the course of 2 weeks, 22 students had replied to the poster solicitation, and another five made contact having been referred from one of the initial 22 students, resulting in a pool of 27 potential participants when, per my request, the student-worker removed all the posters. I found six from the pool of 27 did not meet the eligibility criteria I established.

I contacted the remaining 21 potential participants by phone, asking a few questions to verify their qualifications. I asked, “Are you 18-years old or older?” When replying, students often identified their age rather than just answering yes or no. When asked if they had 12 or more completed credits, again rather than just an affirmative or negative answer they most often replied with a number of completed credits or an estimated amount. As this trend continued, if a student did not offer the number of credits or an estimated amount, I did ask “approximately how many credits do you have completed?” Finally, when making sure they were Pell grant recipients, many similarly answered identifying the amount either as what they thought they were receiving or with an estimate, while others replied with the term “full amount” or something similar, and a few with just a yes or no. Like the question about credits, when a student didn’t answer

with an amount or the "full amount" answer, I probed and asked, "Do you know the amount of grants you receive?" Some then disclosed an amount and if the student did not disclose the amount, then I asked, "Do you receive enough financial aid to pay for school?" This twice led to being told the amount of aid received.

All students received a thank you call for offering to participate, or if I couldn't reach them, a thank you e-mail. I successfully contacted the first 15 students of the 21 within a day and set 14 appointments. The remaining six students were also contacted later and asked to be standby participants. Prior to meeting the student, I confirmed the meeting via e-mail and attached the consent form for their review. I only needed 11 of these participants to reach saturation.

Participants

All 11 student participants were taking classes at the main campus of the community college, and some had previously or planned in the future to take a class or two at one of the satellites. While prior research in this field has consistently mentioned gender, race, religion, and other characteristics of participants, given the small sample size, I omitted these characteristics from this study in order to focus on student experiences and not seek comparisons based on such characteristics or risk revealing identities. While all aliases are nongender specific names, the participants included six females and five males. Their ages ranged between 19 and 31.

Table 1

Participant Background

Name*	Credits Completed	Reported Pell grant
Hayden	60	Full Amount
Dallas	54	$6,195
Jordan	54	$6,000
Madison	54	Unknown**
Mason	52	Full Amount
Alex	50	$6,000
Angel	41	Full Amount
Sydney	40	Over $5,000
Taylor	30	$6,195
Jamie	30	Unknown**
Drew	24	Unknown**

*pseudonym
**All the students who were unaware of the amount of their grant did confirm that the grant amount was enough to pay for school.

Data Collection

Data collection began in November of 2019 and was completed in January of 2020. In total, I completed 11 interviews for analysis. Of these 11, 10 were face-to-face on the main campus in the Student Services Building in a lounge just outside of the cafeteria, seated at a table for two away from other distractions, and all interviews were recorded. At the start of the interview, the consent form was again reviewed and signed by the student, and they were provided a copy. One interview was completed via phone. This sole phone interview was conducted after the student showed up late for the face-to-

face interview, allowing only time to cover the consent form and obtain a signature. All participants also answered my follow-up questions via phone.

I completed two interviews per day. The average interview took approximately 60-minutes. Each participant was told the interview would take up to 60 minutes, and never was the allotted time exceeded. I printed the interview questions (Appendix) on 8 ½ x 11-inch paper, with two questions per page, allowing for room for me to write notes about each participant's answers given during the interview. After each interview, I set 30 minutes aside before the next interview for completion of my field notes using a Cornel Note style journal and only writing on right-side facing pages. The left-side facing pages were intentionally left blank for future use. I recorded all interviews electronically using an app on my cell phone called Audio Recorder, and a backup device was also used to minimize any risk of losing data.

After eight interviews, I began to believe that I was approaching or had reached saturation. However, my ongoing analysis of the data showed that consistent repetition of data was being received regarding a sense of belonging, but I had not reached saturation regarding advising and preparedness, the other two areas of student experience I sought to study; hence, the interviews continued. Following each interview thereafter I examined data to see if I had trustworthy findings. After 11 interviews saturation for all three areas had indeed been reached. The last three interviews of the scheduled 14 were then cancelled, and those three students also received their gift card as promised.

Calls went to all 11 students between 7 and 10 days after the initial interviews to schedule and then ask follow-up questions that would increase the trustworthiness of the

data. I used an audio recorder to record these phone calls. These 11 follow-up interviews were 30 to 60 minutes. I asked each student questions during the follow-up interviews depending upon what data might be missing from their interviews that had been provided by other students during their initial interview. The follow-up interviews gave some a chance to share their perceptions regarding experiences they didn't address in the first interview, and for others it allowed them to extrapolate. During and after each phone call, I added notes in the Cornell Notebook in the summary section. I had transcribed the face-to-face recordings and at this point added verbatim answers to each students' transcripts. The one student who completed the interview via phone was paid $25 via Venmo, a cash delivery service.

I used MS Word's dictate tool to transcribe the recording but found it to only be about 60% accurate. Listening and relistening several times allowed me to correct the transcripts to achieve accuracy.

Finally, as promised, each student received yet another call offering them a copy of the updated transcripts that now contained their follow-up questions and answers. All save one student rejected the offer to receive the transcript. That single student was sent the transcript and replied with a confirmation that the information was correct and a true reflection of their experiences. When the other students rejected a copy of the transcription, I asked if I could summarize the interview while on the phone and all agreed. All the students agreed that my oral summation of their experiences, which took about 20-30 minutes, was accurate. Two students, Taylor and Alex, clarified some of

their statements, and I took notes and then amended their transcripts. I believe this check and balance process provided a richness of data and confirmed saturation.

It should be noted that while my initial plan for this study was to focus on lower socioeconomic community college students as they planned to transition to a 4-year university, I also gathered rich data about their anticipated experiences at the 4-year university as well as some of their prior experiences in high school. I included that information because it influenced their experiences while at the community college.

Data Analysis

I began analyzing interviews manually by having a copy of the transcript displayed directly in front of me on a computer screen. the notes I took while interviewing were placed to my left of the keyboard while my field notes were on the right. As described, my field notes taken after each interview were placed only on right side facing pages. Left-facing pages were blank, and this provided the space for my initial and second round of coding.

To arrive at themes from the coding process, I relied upon recommendations by Ravitch and Carl (2016), Patton (2015), and Creswell (1994), along with data analysis steps described in other published dissertations to create a manual method of coding. Using the highlighter tool in MSWord, I marked the terms used by each participant in yellow as they related to a sense of belonging. I repeated this process using pink for advising and green for preparedness. I found several terms duplicated in the various colors. I then listed all the highlighted terms and recorded the frequency in which they appeared identifying these terms as codes.

I condensed the 119 codes to 65 codes, increasing objectivity by using thesaurus.com to validate synonyms and thereby eliminating many codes. Examining these remaining codes and comparing them to my field notes that provided data regarding tone, inflection, body language and the like, led me through an inductive process arriving at 16 potential categories. Studying these categories as they applied to the three areas of my research question, sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness, and calling upon a certain amount of insight gained through my empirical literature review process, I came to the conclusion that the best way to present my results was to organize and present three themes in regard to the three concepts in my research question, a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness.

The themes I determined from my manual coding process are presented herein as (a) the genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging, with subthemes of orientation and synergy in and out of the classroom; (b) institutional encouragement, with subthemes of resources, first and non-first-generation, peer mentoring, and consultative reception; and (c) adaptation to collegiate life, with subthemes of getting started and academic community.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are all necessary pillars of qualitative research that must be present in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings. In this study, I met all four criteria throughout the research process.

Credibility

To sharpen my interview skills, I practiced on friends and family, some of whom met the criteria for the study, though I included none of them in the study. However, this practice proved essential when seeking to discover the experiences of students by improving open-ended questions that pulled more information from the participants. Having my interview questions adjusted through my practice interviews helped me to improve the questions that would ultimately provide me with answers that aided in the understanding of student experiences. The questions also evolved through my review of questions asked by subject matter experts regarding a sense of belonging, academic advising, and preparedness when they performed their prior research (analyzed in Chapter 2). My dissertation committee chair also reviewed my questions through several iterations.

At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if they could offer any more information about each of the three areas of my study. Often this general question led to a volume of information that they had not yet yielded through the interview. At the end of the initial interview, I would verify some of their answers to be sure I understood their intended meaning and when necessary and made clarifications in my notes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). When the follow-up interviews took place, I repeated this process and concluded this phase asking if I understood their experiences with regard to the three subject areas of the study and provided them within my verbal summary the themes I had arrived at and received their confirmation that I did understand their experiences.

Transferability

To increase transferability, I have sought to provide detailed findings (Patton, 2015). The detail included herein was assured by a meticulous examination of each participant's answers and commentary they made while answering and after answering the questions. That examination resulted in a realization that some participants provided information on subjects that other participants had not mentioned or expanded upon. I conducted follow-up interviews were conducted and where the richness of data provided by one participant was missing from another, then those participants were asked probing questions in order to secure equity of information provided by all participants. My efforts to conduct a second interview with each of the 11 participants has added to the transferability of the findings.

Dependability

The methods employed in this study are dependable as they provide the basis construct to answering the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The detailed reporting of the process and methods used throughout this study help to meet the standards of dependability following benchmarks set by prior researchers and the standards of consistency as required as a characteristic of dependability by Miles et al., (2014). The data gathered about the student's experiences is congruent with the research question. Future researchers can depend on the research performed and reported herein to uncover more on this and ancillary subjects.

Confirmability

Qualitative research, by its nature, is somewhat subjective (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). However, through the compilation of data while note-taking during the interview, field notes were taken immediately after the interviews, recording the interviews, ensuring the accuracy of the transcription through many replays of the recordings then pausing to make manual corrections to the transcripts culminated in a pool of confirmable data. After all data collection was complete each participant was offered a copy of the transcript and asked to confirm the accuracy of my notes regarding the description of their experiences. One of the 11 students accepted the offer and confirmed via e-mail that the transcript was accurate. The other 10 participants allowed me to summarize their responses via telephone. All agreed that my summations were accurate, and two students expanded upon some of their input regarding their experiences. Combined these various techniques ensured a credible and confirmable source of information that resulted in the data presented herein.

Results

The research I conducted and my analysis of the data have resulted in three themes that closely match the three concepts in the RQ, (a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness): (a) the genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging, (b) institutional encouragement, and (c) adaptation to collegiate life.

Some of the responses may be considered discrepant, but in analysis I decided they were consistent enough and reflected different levels of maturity rather than discrepant experiences. One of the students, Drew, presented as being less mature than

the other students and I considered leaving this student out of the study thinking them to be an outlier. I gave the question further consideration, however, and I decided to leave Drew in the study, realizing that in almost any cross-section of society there would be a number of people who would lack a certain level of maturity and Drew's experiences mattered to the study regardless of my opinion of maturity level. Conversely, Hayden and Angel presented themselves with a maturity beyond their years. I sought to avoid the temptation to weigh their responses more heavily than other participants . I have not sought to quantify a percentage of the participants who were either immature or mature.

The Genesis of Experiencing Welcoming and Belonging

The theme of the genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging was the strongest of all findings, with aspects of this theme most frequently mentioned by participants. I broke up aspects of their interviews regarding this experience of feeling welcomed and belonging into two subthemes: *orientation* and *synergy in and out of the classroo*m.

Ten of the 11 students reported experiences that were positive regarding a sense of belonging and being welcomed at SCC. In response to the question "please tell me what it has been like for you at SCC since you started," each of these students demonstrated tone and body language that included giggles and smiles and used words like "wow," "awesome," and "great." Taylor was the only outlier to the initial enthusiastic response to this question but later in her interview said things similar to the other participants. Taylor began with arms crossed, an almost expressionless face, and spoke very quietly and somberly. As the interview continued a calmness seemed to take

over and Taylor eventually opened up. Then, in response to this question, Taylor said that ”it’s been okay.” When asked to expand on that answer Taylor went on to add

> my classes are good, the students are friendly, and it’s good, real good, I like it here the college did a lot to encourage us. There are lots of clubs available, events where you can learn more about different stuff not only in your major but about almost anything. It’s all interesting, but then no one mingles. Friends stay with friends.

Orientation. I’ve identified what students said about orientation as a subtheme regarding the welcoming nature of their experiences. Each student recalled a similar experience at the mandatory orientation. The description of the orientation, shared by all, helped me understand why they felt it was welcoming. The process began with mingling; most students just remaining with the person they came with which was often a family member. A moderator started the event off by introducing themselves and welcoming everyone to SCC while an assistant went around and passed out a bingo-style card that served as an icebreaker. The new students had to find among the others at orientation the student who came the furthest, a student born in another country, a student who liked math, etc. This activity forced the students to speak with one another. The first student to fill up their bingo card received an SCC backpack and tee-shirt.

There were tables set up in a circle outside of the student services building. Students would stroll from table to table, often with their parents, and met people in leadership from different departments, the library, veteran’s affairs, clubs, financial aid, and academic advising. There were also local businesses present handing out inexpensive

giveaways. The bookstore had a table with a spinning wheel. Each student was given the opportunity to spin, and they would receive anything from a 5% off coupon, a free tote bag, and even a $100 gift card. Drew said that "I remember on my way home I felt really good about getting started." Jamie said the orientation icebreaker was "kind of goofy and made me feel nervous. I'm not really good at talking to strangers. I didn't come close to finishing the game. But you know, now that I look back, I wish I did." When reflecting upon a combination of all the activities at orientation eight of 11 of the participants reported they had met or at least had a conversation with another soon-to-be student. Sydney said that when encountering a student considering SCC, Sydney reminds them to go to orientation and tells them "it's great!" Taylor too was glad to have attended orientation stating, "that if I didn't go to orientation the first day (of classes) would have been so scary."

Hayden, Jordan, Madison, Angel, Sydney, and Alex, all of whom had 40 credits or more and were approaching graduation, provided the potential for having the most experiences all reported a level of comfort, welcoming, and belonging. All six of these students echoed sentiments put forward by Hayden:

> There seemed to almost a welcoming process when I started school here. First, at orientation, I met students that were just like me, starting out, lost, you know, not knowing what to expect. Then they had student helpers there who had been going to school here for a while. I was introduced to many different programs, got information about events that were coming up soon and other stuff…I was kind of shy, but their encouragement to join clubs, helped me change into a more, out of

> my shell type of person. Soon I was attending events and even helping set up chairs, putting posters up around campus. I went from being someone who was invited to stuff to someone who became the person doing the inviting. I've grown as a person here, and SCC's open arms helped make that happen.

Hayden, like Sydney came out of the proverbial shell and became a welcomer. Other positive experiences at orientation included Drew who made an initial group of acquaintances at orientation. Angel, a self-described extravert, who received at least a half-dozen high-fives from passersby during the interview, saw students in classes who were at orientation and reached out to them in the classroom before and after class. Sydney informed me during the interview that "at orientation there were probably a 100 of us and some of those faces looked familiar the first day."

While all 11 participants reported positive experiences regarding their own sense of belonging, some recognized the inability for others to "fit in." Hayden pointed out that

> many students come to class and then have to run off to jobs or family or whatever. The (public transportation) bus stops right outside of the Student Services Building, and you can see those students reading, already trying to get homework done while they wait for the bus.

Alex added, "I don't know what the numbers are, but it seems like most of us who come to school during the day, came right out of high school. I have had to take a couple of classes at night and the students there are older. Some veterans out of the military, some older than my parents!" Alex further expressed an opinion that some may not feel like they belong at the community college because of their age. During follow-up

questions to other students, Sydney, Drew, Taylor, and Angel and Alex made similar statements about age differences. While Hayden, Jamie, and Jordan dismissed age result in evening students feeling a lack of belonging but did make comment regarding work schedules and other responsibilities affecting the role school plays in these evening students' lives. As Jordon said, "it makes going to school an obligation for them, probably part of their job, and it's just something they have to get done."

Synergy in and out of the classroom. As I discovered in the literature review a sense of belonging can often begin in the classroom. Drew built friendships in the classroom admitting to having missed a few classes at the beginning of the first-term, and "this forced me to borrow notes (from my classmates), but in the end those few people became friends, and then those led to friends, who led to more friends." Mason inferred that other students asking questions in class created a comfort level making it easier for others to ask questions. Mason used the term "academic nature," when describing the classroom and the campus referring to everyone

> being here for the same thing, we are here to learn. I mean some take it more seriously than others, but I think cliques become cliques based on how serious they are taking school. In my high school, Black kids hung out with Black kids, Whites with Whites. Those that party hang with other partiers, those of us who are into learning more in order to transfer to SU hang out. The cool part of the basic classes like English and Math is that we don't all hang out by majors, so you end up with friends in lots of different programs.

Not all experiences in the classroom were positive as will be reported in the next theme.

Synergy in and out of the classroom during the first term helped add to the student's sense of belonging, but its continuation from term to term contributed to maintaining that sense of belonging, including through study groups. Class sizes were an element that contributed toward that synergy. Several students mentioned that the larger classes created a need for study groups. Jordan spoke about English 101 and said that lessons took place in a large lecture hall with "I don't know maybe a 100 students, but we all broke up into smaller study groups, and it was more like your study group was your classmates." These and other study groups contributed to the synergy outside of the classroom. I asked Jordan about participating in other study groups and I eventually asked all the participants about study groups. Jordan reported being in at least one study group per term. Dallas and Mason said that during their time there they were in various study groups but that the nursing program also had regular study groups. Nursing students would attend from a variety of different classes and help each other. Sydney and Hayden were each in one to two study groups per term. Madison and Angel said that they even formed study groups. Taylor had not yet been in a study group.

I gathered additional information about synergy when Jaime told me that "after just a few classes in College Algebra, it was like we were all friends. We could joke and even make fun of each other, and no one was offended." Madison stated that in the first few classes

> everyone was just starting out, so none of us really knew what to expect. I didn't know if I should call the teacher, 'professor, doctor, or what. In one class he wrote just his first and last name on the board. Turned out I wasn't the only one

> confused. When we was walking out, I heard someone say the same thing to another student.

Mason said that "I would say that about 30-40% of my friends come from within the (nursing) program . . . starting off with classes in our basic subjects led us to make friends in different classes than just nursing." When asked what classes were like, Jamie said,

> You know, dine and dash . . . when you eat at a restaurant and then everyone runs out before paying? Well, we have professors that teach and dash. They show up, practically read from their notes or from a PowerPoint, and then when class is over, they be the first ones out the door.

Upon follow-up questions, three additional students said or implied that "teach and dash" happens all the time. One seemingly informed student explained the difference between full-time faculty and adjuncts and said, "the adjuncts might as well be wearing a McDonald's uniform as they leave class running off to their real jobs. "Jordan said that there were,

> some faculty that really give a (expletive) about us. I go to a lot of intramural sport events and you can always find some faculty there. They get into it as much as I do. It's kind of cool to see them as people too. I've had conversations with professors about movies we have seen and stuff like that. We just had the planetarium show us Mars and I went with a professor.

However, Jordan also added, "some faculty are so obviously burnt [out], you can tell they don't even want to be here." During the interview with Angel, the student who got high-

fives while I was interviewing her, a professor walked by and Angel gave him a warm greeting, the professor didn't acknowledge Angel. I asked if that was normal and Angel just replied, "I don't know, he could just be having a bad day, but more than likely he doesn't even know I am in his class." While faculty may not have always provided experiences desired by students, the college did offer encouragement in different ways.

Institutional Encouragement

SCC provided resources for the student body and those resources have an impact on a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness. These resources are both tangible and intangible**.** I will first be addressing tuition so that I might better relate the experience of students to the tangible resources. I will then present my findings for the intangible resources available for first-generation students, non-first generations students, peer mentoring, and consultative reception.

Resources. When I asked the students "what aspect of SCC they liked most, and can you tell me about it?" Every participant listed cost as a major factor in choosing the school. SCC costs less than $100 per credit while SU exceeds $400 per credit, assuming instate tuition at both institutions. Angel, Sydney, and Hayden reported that Smooth Transition as their number one reason they chose to attend SCC. Angel, Sydney, Jamie, and Hayden remarked that going to the community college first allowed them to pay lower tuition rates for the first two years before advancing to the 4-year university. Alex also listed location as a high priority in choosing a school, while Drew said that a major contributing factor was dating someone who already attended SCC. Dallas enrolled at SCC canceling attendance at the private school before the senior year of high school

ended, attributing the decision to the much lower cost. Mason, on the other hand, made the change only 2 weeks prior to classes starting, also citing cost as the number one reason for choosing SCC, but was quick to add,

> I was going to earn my BSN at (the private school) but when I found out about Smooth Transition and combined that with the cost, I realized just how much less student loans I would have and made the move. Fortunately, it wasn't too late.

Although this RN to BSN program is technically not part of Smooth Transitions, these students did qualify for the study as they plan to move on to the 4-year university.

More to the point of the purpose of this study was the next question, which was "what has kept you at SCC and why?" Every participant changed their answer from the first question slightly. Hayden listed the quality of the education as the number one reason for remaining at SCC. Angel said that the school provided a sense of "autonomy" that had not been felt before, and similarly, Dallas answered that the college treated students "like adults." Other answers included references to the beauty of the campus, knowledge of the campus geography, familiarity with using the library, contentment with their major and classes, and transportation (public transportation is available but free for SCC students). Overwhelmingly, however, every student listed game room, friends, clubs, and events as part of the reason for feeling comfortable and remaining at SCC.

Students identified specific resources as relevant to their experiences throughout the interviews. The game room appeared most frequently across the participant's answers. This area is located on the first floor of the student services building and is about 2,500 square feet. Inside there are three pool tables, four older style pinball games, three ping-

pong tables, and 12 recliners all facing large screen monitors for gamers. There was also an area with couches, tables, and chairs. During the data gathering process I was outside the game room on eight different occasions. I saw through large windows into the atrium that the room was always full, but not overflowing. I spent some time in the game room and witnessed students interacting with one another, many of whom it was clear had not known the other student before this engagement in the game room. Students did an excellent job of keeping the area clean but there was also staff available in the room that assisted with cleanliness. The game room was next to the cafeteria and between these two spaces always stood a security guard. Two of the students interviewed stated that they felt "safe" on campus and just one, when asked about needed resources, replied that more security was needed.

Other institutional resources mentioned included clubs. Jamie, Angel, and Hayden all used the word "diversity" in their description of how they felt on campus. Jamie's response included, "There is a social diversity on campus, and everyone seems to accept everyone else." Angel and Hayden's remarks echoed the same sentiment. Jamie provided an example explaining belonging to

> several clubs, a board game club, the X-American club (a club based on Jamie's ethnicity). But what's cool, is that I am also a member of the Y-American club (Jamie does not share the ethnicity of the club's name nor it's other members). I just like the music, food, dancing (of that culture). It's not about DNA, it's about respecting one another and just saying 'hey you're a person and I'm a person, let's just be people together.' Bottom line is we may be White, Black, Hispanic,

Jews, Christians, Muslims, but when it all comes down to it, we are students, right?

I presented all interviewees with a sheet of paper that described four different approaches to academic advising, and I reviewed each with them verbally, answering any questions as we reviewed the various approaches. I confirmed their understanding before we continued. Developmental, intrusive, prescriptive, and teacher -as-adviser were the different listed approaches. Angel, Sydney, Alex, Jamie, and Drew are all first-generation college students. Taylor's parents were both medical doctors who received their degrees in other countries and are not considered qualified to practice medicine in the United States. As Taylor's parents did not go to college in the U.S., Taylor is considered a first-gen student by SCC standards. All first-generation students, regardless of their membership in Smooth Transition, receive developmental advising according to the director of academic advising for their first year (30 credits) and thereafter receive prescriptive advising. However, of the six first-generation students, only five reported that they received developmental advising their first year after reviewing the written and explained definitions. Drew, once again an outlier reported prescriptive advising from the very beginning until the time of the interview. While Drew personally considers themselves as a second-year student at SCC, has only accumulated 24 of the 30 credits that creates the internal benchmark that the college uses for identifying second-year students. Drew described that advising reached out via e-mail and phone calls many times trying to make appointments. When they did speak eventually, an appointment was set up, but Drew did not attend. Drew expressed this may have happened "two or three

times." Similar to the research in the literature review in Chapter 2, Drew depends primarily on peers for academic advice. Missing appointments makes Drew's description of receiving prescriptive advising versus developmental advising unreliable.

Students had both positive and negative input regarding the library in this area. Jamie, Drew, and Madison found that the library was only useful to them via their own digital access. Jordan and Sydney expressed a lack of knowledge in the library staff noting that most of the help came from fellow students working there "who didn't know much more about the library than I did," remarked Jordan. Hayden, Dallas, Mason, and Taylor all mentioned a deficiency in the technology available at the library. These students, because they are transitioning to SU are also granted access to the university library where technology is on the cutting edge. Many students also made use of the university library and Taylor specified "especially at crunch time."

When I asked the students more about retention at SCC and what made them feel positive, answers included references to the beauty of the campus, knowledge of the campus geography, familiarity with using the library, and transportation (public transportation is available and free for SCC students).

First and non-first-generation students. Information gathered from all the first-generation students described advising with providing information about classes, but also about personal finances, jobs, health care issues, keeping them informed about upcoming events, and more. Even Drew agreed that he received these services leading me to believe that there was a lack of understanding by Drew about developmental advising.

At orientation, staff gave the first-generation students a packet of information not provided to other students and filled out what seemed to be more forms than others received on their clipboard. These forms asked questions about their studies but also delved into their interests, employment, living arrangements transportation, and whether they needed help from a list of services available including financial aid. Madison, Jordan, and Hayden, non-first-generation students recalled being shown how to register for classes on a computer and were then directed to a pool of computers set up to assist them with setting up their own schedules. Staff told the non-first-generation students that they should schedule an appointment with Academic Advising after their first week in classes. The first-generation students left orientation registered for classes by the academic adviser with an appointment scheduled during the first week of school.

A Student Assistance Office is housed within the Student Services building where I conducted the interviews. Inside that office, there is a designated area and personnel to assist only first-generation students. At the close of one of my interview days I went to this office and inquired about the package that first-generation students receive. I was given a plastic shopping bag and told that this is what is handed out at orientation. Inside the bag were brochures on Smooth Transition, one from the college listing all of the clubs available, several brochures from individual clubs on campus, one from a fraternity, another from campus security, a condensed student handbook, a packet of multi-colored pages that provided information on suicide prevention, mental health, drinking and driving, a couple of pages that provided a directory of contact information for various services, and a welcome letter from the president of the college. The staff also informed

me that all first-generation students receive a once a month e-mail informing them of events happening on campus and that the student receives a survey at the end of each term asking the student to rate the services provided.

During the portion of my data collection that was follow-up interviews, I asked the first-generation students if they found this developmental advising useful. They all responded in the affirmative. For those who were no longer receiving developmental advising, I asked how they felt about the prescriptive advising. All had something harsh to say. Jamie, who had just transitioned to prescriptive advising said, "It sucks, it's like one day I was their favorite and the next I was a freckled-faced stepchild."

These first-generation participants all seemed to suffer a bit of shock as they moved above the 30-credit limit and when they transferred from the developmental advisor to a different academic advisor who utilized a more prescriptive method of advising. Advice became limited to academics and often just related to course sequencing. Sydney refused the change to a different advisor and as they described

> I just needed to remain with my advisor. She knew what I needed from school and the obstacles I was dealing with in my personal life. I don't think anyone expected me to put up the fuss that I did, but when I did, they caved and let me stay with her.

The demand to remain with the developmental advisor did not go unheard and both the advisor and Sydney worked it out with administration that the existing developmental advisor would remain on the job.

The students who were not first-generation students began with a designated prescriptive advisor but reported that if they had a need, they would often have to take advantage of a "walk-in" service and they would meet with the next available advisor. For a campus with over 20,000 students, it seemed short-staffed to only have three of these non-first-generation advisors and four first-generation advisors. As an admission advisor myself, I was acquainted with one advisor from each category. When I queried about what I perceived as a short staff, I was informed by both advisors that they were not overworked and believed that far less than 1/3 of the student body took advantage of the advising department in the first place. Both advisors reported being very happy in their jobs and believed that all the other advisors were too. One stated, "I think it keeps us young. When we see a new student moving successfully towards graduation, I feel a sense of pride, like I was graduating too."

Peer mentoring. Dallas and Mason are enrolled in an RN to BSN program. They will earn their RN at SCC and seamlessly advance to the SU for their BSN, but technically are not part of the Smooth Transition program. Their sense of belonging has been bolstered by their program. The students from both the community college and the 4-year university comingle academically through their externships, internships, and clinical competency courses. As Dallas reported:

> We share more than just being friends, we all have the same goals. I mean some of us want to go into this kind of nursing others going into another, but in the end, we all want to be nurses. The student nurses at SU are mentors, but they also set an example for us outside of nursing. A lot of the rest of my friends studying

> business, IT, whatever, come here to party, and school is second. Those of us in the nursing program put school first and other things like partying and other things, come later…but the thing is, I already feel welcomed at SU and I don't even start there until the summer.

Mason, the other nursing student, also reports positive experiences about belonging or being welcomed at the community college. She said during the interview that

> if it wasn't for orientation, I don't know how I would have felt at the very beginning. What I can say, is that immediately I felt at home here and that hasn't changed. I have to work a full-time job and at times that takes me away from some of the activities, I could be part of. A lot of kids come here and don't know what they want to do, us in nursing, well we are pretty committed to a career already. It's like we are a little community inside this great big one. said Mason.

Consultative reception. There are many sources at SCC for students to receive advice. Since all the participants were receiving Pell grants many also needed help with financial aid. Angel and Taylor reported deficiencies in the services they received from Financial Aid. Angel expanded saying,

> the answers they have for any questions you have are like they are machines with recordings. I have asked a question, been given an answer and when I didn't understand the answer, they just stupidly repeated the same answer again. Hey, if I didn't get it the first time, why would I understand it now. They don't even look you in the eye when they talk to you. Financial Aid is like the DMV of SCC.

Hayden expressed positive experiences with financial aid but wished there were more financial services, “like help with managing my money, help with figuring out how to afford books and in general just helping me with money. It’s all so stressful.” (Hayden is not a first-generation student and was not aware that referrals to services like this to other students). I asked if the school offered a book advance, and the reply was “No, but that sure would be helpful.” Again, after this interview, I went to the financial aid office. They confirmed that students approved for financial aid, who have more aid than school costs can be advanced up to $500 toward their books per term. During my follow-up interviews I asked all the participants about this; seven said there was no such thing, and four not only knew about it but had used the benefit. Hayden was annoyed at not having ever been told.

The eight remaining students all had positive experiences to report about the financial aid department. Jordan and Madison both reported that there were mistakes made in their financial aid application that the financial aid department cleared up, and Jordon added: “had they not helped me I wouldn’t be here today.” Dallas had not changed the school code on the FAFSA once they made the decision to change from the private school to SCC. Dallas applauded the financial aid department as “saving my butt,” when they were able to help make the necessary adjustment in their offices. Part of the FAFSA application process, necessary for approval is “Loan Entrance Counseling.” SCC sponsored and even “Understanding Financial Aid.” Posters were hung around campus inviting all students to attend as reported by both Hayden and

Jamie. However, the first-generation students received personal invitations via e-mail with a request to RSVP.

Adaptation to Collegiate Life

The third and final theme focuses on college preparedness**.** SCC uses a placement exam for students who either have not taken the SAT/ACT or have lower than usual scores. This is a common exam used among many community colleges called PERT (program evaluation review technique). Drew, Alex, Dallas, Hayden, Angel, Taylor, and Jamie were required to take the exam. If a student met specific acceptable guidelines, they may immediately enter college-level courses. Students who arrive at the community college less than prepared are referred to taking a pre-college course, most often in writing or math.

Getting started. When first starting at the college students mentioned above that were required to take the PERT, only Jamie and Taylor proceeded directly into college courses. The remainder, Drew, Alex, Dallas, Hayden, and Angel all had taken pre-college class(es). All five were placed in a pre-college writing class and just Angel had to take both writing and math. When asked about their experiences with these classes the students had nothing but positive comments. They all recognized a deficiency in their performance from high school and were expecting to have to take a preparatory class. SCC provides these classes to students free of charge for their first-time through the course. However, if a student fails the preparatory course and needs to repeat it then they are charged the normal rate per credit but do not receive credits toward graduation. Angel

did express some disappointment but did understand the need for the class. “When I moved on for college algebra, I was (expletive) glad I took that beginners class first.”

Academic community. SCC does much to enhance the academic community on campus. They provide students with free tutoring services. Some of the students taking advantage of this over their time at SCC were Hayden, Dallas, Mason, Madison, Alex, and Angel, each had said that their professors or advisors had suggested signing up for tutoring. Bulletin boards are placed strategically throughout the Student Services Building, and when looking for my posters, I found many tutoring services offering help for a fee. Alex and Jamie reported that they had taken advantage of the services offered. All the students that utilized tutors reported positive experiences. Hayden, Dallas, Mason, and Madison said that their tutoring needs were for general education classes taken when they first started. Alex reported that the choice to take private tutoring in addition to SCC supplied tutoring was due to a delay in receiving the service from SCC and that there was a waiting list. However, Alex also reported that the SCC tutoring services were better than the private tutoring services.

One student informed me that they had a learning disability and that there was an office that helped with accommodations. They said that teachers gave them extra time to take tests, and if a paper was due on a Friday, they usually were given until Monday to turn it in. This student credited their advancement through their program with the adaptations the school provided. This same student was apprehensive about whether or not such accommodations would be available at SU and added that “I have asked at the

Smooth Transitions office, but they didn't know. I guess I have to go to SU myself to find out."

When asked, "can you tell me about your experiences with SCC and how they may have helped or hindered your advancement as a student?" Hayden, Dallas, Madison, and Mason all reported in similar terms that advancing through the curriculum was often decided upon which classes their friends were taking next. As I delved into this, I found that common among their experiences was that at least one of the students in this group had received sequential class advancement advice either from academic advising or a faculty member and the rest from this group followed. Hayden also reported that while they had completed the required 60 credits for Smooth Transition to SU, they still needed to take two more classes because of receiving poor advice (from peers) regarding course requirements for the associate degree. While Hayden was the only student to report such an experience, the literature review pointed out much higher statistics of students earning credits that did not transfer to their 4-year university. However, the research completed for that information in the literature review did not disclose any transition program. The office of Smooth Transition, when I inquired reported that "every effort is made to see to it that this doesn't happen." However, they did admit to it happening from time to time. A similar report was provided by the director of academic advising when I inquired about students taking classes not needed for transition, or even just for graduation. The director did have statistics on the percentage of students, not specific to Smooth Transition, but applicable to all students having to take additional courses due to taking courses that were not required for their degree plan but would not share that quantitative data. He said.

> that if I gave you those statistics it would skew your study. Many of the students we are talking about chose to take classes on their own, sometimes against the advice of an academic advisor, and this is part of the reason they must take additional classes beyond the normal 60 credits.

A student not included in the study, who had watched me in the Student Services Building was curious about what I was doing. I explained my study and this student did not qualify but we conversed, and she informed me that she was taking her last class to graduate and had accumulated 90 credits at SCC. She was not part of the Smooth Transition program and made all her decisions on sequencing on her own.

While many students reported dissatisfaction with faculty, Hayden and Angel, reported that caring faculty advanced their learning. Angel said,

> I had more than a few classes so far that required me to take a prerequisite. I found that when I moved, like from Anatomy I to Anatomy II that the professor from the first class had really prepared me for the second class which was much harder.

I asked the students if they "felt that their time at SCC has prepared them for their upcoming experiences at SCC, and could they tell me about those experiences?" All except Drew and Jamie reported in the affirmative. Hayden and Angel both had similar answers expressing that their experiences have gotten them used to the academic rigors that they anticipate at SU. Dallas and Mason similarly answered but were specific to mention that writing research papers in their nursing program was key to their preparedness. Drew said,

> I think community college is just an extension of high school. I am scared (expletive) about just how ready I am for real college. Don't get me wrong I am moving on to SU, but it won't surprise me at all if I don't make it. Sometimes I think about changing my major here from biology to a trade certificate like medical assistant just so that I can get a job when I am done here, but my parents would never go for that.

I asked students if they could tell me "how are you doing in school?" Drew, Jamie, Taylor, and Alex indicated that they were doing well and did not mention their GPA. Drew's reply was "okay," Jamie and Taylor both replied with the sentiment that they could be doing better, and Alex just remarked, "not too well." The remainder of the students all reported GPAs over 3.0 and Hayden, Dallas, Mason, and Madison exceeded 3.5. For the students that quantified their SCC GPA, the average came to 3.57. I asked during the follow-up interviews how their GPA compared to the results they had received in high school. The purpose of this line of question was to quantify any positive or negative development as a student while as SCC. Drew reported that the grades received in high school were the same as in college, which was consistent with the remarks provided that SCC was just an extension of high school.

Summary

The analysis of information gathered from interviews with 11 students at SCC all of whom came from low socioeconomic backgrounds and were transitioning to SU provided rich data regarding the student's experiences as they applied to a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness. That analysis resulted in an examination of three

central themes, the genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging, institutional encouragement, and adaptation to collegiate life The first theme of genesis of experiencing welcoming included positive student experiences regarding a sense of belonging, as derived from orientation, and synergy in and out of the classroom. The theme of institutional encouragement revealed both positive and negative student experiences regarding resources, first-generation and non-first-generation students, and peer mentoring. The last theme, adaptation to collegiate life, addressed findings regarding getting started, and the academic community again reflecting both positive and negative experiences.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss and provide my interpretation of the results from this chapter calling upon the input from scholarly research mentioned in chapter 2. I will identify limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and the maintenance of policies and procedures mentioned herein as well as some potential changes to improve student outcomes for community college students transitioning to a 4-year university who come from a low socioeconomic background. Finally, I will posit the influence that all three elements of the research question, a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness have on one another in enriching or prohibiting transitioning for lower socioeconomic status students from community college to a 4-year university.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness during the transitioning process from community college to a 4-year university. Discovery of lower socioeconomic status students' experiences concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness may provide for improved practices and policies of transitional programs while potentially resulting in improved student outcomes.

From analysis of semistructured interview questions and follow-up interviews I identified three themes to explain the experiences of the student population in this study: (a) the genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging, (b) institutional encouragement, and (c) adaptation to collegiate life. These three themes answer the research question: What are the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students as they transition from a community college to a 4-year university regarding a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness? The three themes derived from my analysis resulted in a recognizable relationship between the three experiences characterized in the research question.

The theme of genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging includes subthemes of orientation and synergy in and out of the classroom. The theme of institutional encouragement includes both positive and negative student experiences regarding advising through the subthemes of resources, first-generation and non-first-generation students, and peer mentoring. The last theme, adaptation to collegiate life,

addresses findings regarding getting started and the academic community, again reflecting both positive and negative experiences on preparedness.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section I interpret the results of the study considering both the conceptual framework and the empirical literature I reviewed in Chapter 2.

Interpretation in Light of the Conceptual Framework

Schlossberg and colleagues (Anderson et al., 2012) theorized that people transition out, in, and through an experience. All three themes can be identified in Schlossberg's theory. When transitioning out of high school and into community college, the genesis of welcoming and belonging were infused by orientation and synergy both in and out of the classroom. While transitioning in community college, institutional encouragement for both first and non-first-generation students were further understood from the student's experiences. Finally, as students experienced the process of going through community college, they were led by the influencing factors of adaptation to collegiate life.

In this study, I found that orientation provided all 11 students a transition into SCC from high school that laid the foundation for a sense of belonging as they came out of high school and into community college. The students in this study also had experiences through their time at SCC that aided in their sense of belonging during the time of transition. Their reported positive sense of belonging was also attributed to their experiences with synergy in and out of the classroom, which is consistent with Strayhorn's (2016) model of student development. Strayhorn posited that a student's

feelings and behaviors influenced their sense of belonging through the transition process. That was confirmed by the findings of my study under the genesis of welcoming and belonging theme.

Adelman's (2006) momentum theory posits that tenacious advancements lead to one success after another. The adaption to collegiate life theme addressed the unprepared students who required precollege courses and succeeded in these classes. They reported they advanced into the college courses and were remaining at SCC. These same students also displayed a sense of self-efficacy by taking advantage of institutional encouragement and used advising more than other students in the sample. They also took advantage of other SCC resources as prescribed by Bandura's (2004) social cognitive theory.

Interpretation in Light of the Literature Review

Much of the prior research I reviewed also focused on lower socioeconomic status students, but few studies addressed students in community colleges as they transition to 4-year university regarding a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness. In this section, I interpret the three themes in light of the prior research at diverse settings.

A sense of belonging. A sense of belonging was influenced by all three themes, a genesis of welcoming and belonging, institutional encouragement, and adjustment to collegiate life. The genesis of experiencing welcoming and belonging provided the most positive and consistent input from the students in the study. The literature review provided findings from prior researchers reflecting factors that both enhanced and hindered a lower socioeconomic student's sense of belonging.

All the students reported that orientation had a positive impact as the student's journey began through the community college, providing the first real introduction to SCC and a smooth transition from high school into SCC. Flaga (2006) found that orientation was the most important tool for transitioning students. Arnold et al. (2015), found that orientation fueled the momentum of students as they began college. Orientation also offered an introduction to other students that would be developed into friendships.

I interpreted the positive experiences of the students in this study to be similar to those of students in DeWine et al.'s (2017) study, who reported their positive experiences beginning from and extending through a familiarity with the campus and a comfort and friendliness level with peers. DeWine et al. also reported that large class sizes presented an obstacle for lower socioeconomic status students developing a sense of belonging; however, what 10 of the 11 students described as larger classes, three identifying the quantity between 80 and 100, were reported to facilitate a sense of belonging through starting or taking part in a study group originating in the larger classroom.

I found the more the students felt welcomed the more engaged they were with other resources at the college, like academic advising and study groups, which seemed to contribute to their sense of belonging. Fink et al. (2016) and Thomas et al. (2016) both found that study groups aided in acquiring a sense of belonging. Kirby (2015), Pichon (2016), and Sadowski et al. (2018) all attributed the classroom as a foundation for developing a sense of belonging and attributed much to the faculty. Eight of the 11 students in this study confirmed their experiences in the classroom aided in their

belonging, but not as a result of anything that could be attributed to faculty. However, in this setting, the students sometimes had a negative experience with faculty and instead a solidarity among the students is what added to their sense of belonging.

Barber (2018) heard students' positive experiences in feeling welcomed as having to do with tenacity or perseverance, and I found the more credits the participants had, the higher their level of feeling welcomed, indicating that SCC fosters a sense of belonging that developes the longer they attend. Many attributed their feelings of belonging to new friendships but also credited SCC with facilitating those friendships through clubs, events, orientation, and other activities that promoted their perceived positive value in the academic environment. All 11 students who took part in this study demonstrated positive feelings about belonging, including one seemingly introverted student who became more involved in campus activities.

Grobecker (2016) studied nursing students and found that intervention with students who were performing poorly revealed a lack of a sense of belonging. While intervention was not part of this study, the two nursing students reported positive experiences regarding a sense of belonging and they described their study groups, their peer mentoring, and the other positive experiences with belonging described by the other nine participants: orientation, synergy in and out of the classroom, and academic community. The students in this study seemed to be adaptable and resourceful, perhaps more than those in some prior studies, which may be a result of self-selection in this small interview study or the possibly unique nature of the SCC campus programs.

Academic advising. Donaldson et al. (2016), Green (2016), and He and Hutson (2016) found that academic advisors and their relationships to the lower socioeconomic status student influenced retention and student outcomes. In this study I did not seek to make such a direct finding but did find that the first-generation students who received developmental advising did report positive experiences with academic advising and that developmental advising further assisted a student in their experiences regarding a sense of belonging. Harris (2018) found that the most common advising approach was prescriptive advising. This study confirmed those findings. Five students reported they only received prescriptive advising through their time at SCC. And while six of the 11 participants described receiving developmental advising for their first 30 credits, they were then moved to prescriptive advising. Their experiences with prescriptive advising disappointed the participants. Angel said, "I really could have done this myself by just looking at the catalog for prerequisites. I wasted a lot of time waiting for an advisor." Similarly, Hayden explained the experience of prescriptive advising by saying, "I got more valuable information from students who were ahead of me. Now, I am one of those students and feel an obligation to help those behind me because academic advising certainly doesn't help."

Franko (2017), Green (2016), and Stewart et al. (2015) all found that low socioeconomic students were more likely to arrive at community college unprepared due to aspects of the community from which the student originated, such as having attended a less than desirable high school, difficulty with jobs to balance study in their lives, and issues at home, and were more likely to be required to take precollege classes in English

and math. The students in this study who required precollege course work admitted that not only had they expected to have to take these type classes, but they knew it was due to their personal lack of performance in high school. SCC provides some students with a more holistic advising approach through developmental advising based on whether the student is first-generation or not and does not consider the student's need for precollege work. Schneider and Kim (2017) found that students required to take precollege courses were also required to participate in more developmental advising than other students. My interpretations from my findings would agree with Schneider & Kim's findings, but I would also recognize that SCC does not provide any accommodation to the type of advising a student receives based on their entry-level skills, only based on their first-generational status.

Taylor and Jain (2017) and Xu et al. (2018) found that lower socioeconomic status students experienced difficult transitions to 4-year universities from community college, often due to a lack of transferrable credits. SSC's Smooth Transition students reported experiencing a greater readiness for SU based upon their experiences thus far. Through more use of academic advising as compared to students in Taylor and Jain's and Xu et al.'s studies, students using the vertical transitioning program were more assured to have their credits transferred.

College preparedness. Gershenfield (2016) found that students' successful transition from community college to a 4-year university can be affected by their readiness upon arrival at the community college. The better prepared, the easier their transition. I found that the six of the 11 students who were required to take pre-college

classes did not perceive they were deterred from advancing through their community college experiences. The results of their pre-college coursework seemed to be akin with Adelman's (2006) momentum theory which suggests success in one course led to further successes.

Researchers have found low socioeconomic students arrived at college unprepared due to a lack of information (Franko, 2017; Green, 2016; Stewart et al., 2015) as well as inadequate high schools, work-life imbalance, and issues at home (Patton, 2016). The six student participants who were required to take pre-college courses all accepted responsibility for needing to take such courses due to a lack of proper academic participation during high school on their own part, implying their schools were inadequate.

Limitations

As in any study, transferability of the findings can be limited due to the population of the study, location, and the wide variety experiences participants have had in life (Patton, 2015). This study is no different. The self-identified students in the study all reported positive experiences regarding a sense of belonging but many reported that other students may not feel this way because they are older, attending in the evening, have families, or work full-time jobs. Perhaps the students volunteered in response to seeing the poster because they felt good about their experiences, and those with less satisfactory experiences may have been reluctant, or less likely to spend time on the campus where the posters hung. Also, through the method of identifying qualifying candidates only identified students who attending full-time, mostly taking classes during

the day and no other section of the SCC population was considered. In studying the experiences of this population, it also would have proven to be very beneficial to identify low socioeconomic students after their arrival at SU.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because the study participants who reported having a sense of belonging believed that nontraditional students may not have a sense of belonging, I would recommend a study that focused on non-traditional, low socioeconomic students aged 25 and older, to extend understanding past the findings of this study. Studying students from a low socioeconomic background who have graduated from community college and are studying at a 4-year university would also further extend understanding of the experiences of this socio-economic group of students. Also understanding the lower socioeconomic status students' experiences from high school through graduate school regarding the sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness could impact retention and completion rates all having input, potentially on positive social change.

I also recommend greater academic rigor in the first year of community college. Four of the student responses included references to the first year of community college being like an extension of high school. The words, gestures, and tone of eight of the students suggested they did not think the first term of community college was difficult, in fact, they seemed to indicate it was easy. The Florida postsecondary education readiness test, PERT, is given to an entering community college student at SCC and other community colleges that have open admissions to place students into courses. If the PERT was offered earlier in the admissions process than at orientation a student may be

able to self-prepare, potentially obtaining a higher score, and avoiding pre-college classes. The PERT should be no different that. students attending SU or other 4-year universities taking the SAT/ACT and often retaking the exam in hopes of obtaining a higher score to assure admission to the school of their choice. Additionally, SCC and other community colleges could offer summer-bridge programs like those described by Koduma et al. (2018) after taking the PERT and prior to retaking the exam just before starting classes.

Rall (2016) found that students often experience loss of interest and motivation, referred to as summer melt, after high school graduation and before starting college. One of the limitations of this study was the lack of data from any former students who were no longer at the community college due to successful transfer to the 4-year college or dropping out. This study also did not consider students who never entered the college. Therefore, the summer melt that Rall wrote of could have been experienced by young adults not at SCC and not in the study. If orientation, a proven successful resource from this and other studies, was offered in late spring and early summer, then it may be possible to reduce the number of students lost, prior to starting by creating a sense of enthusiasm and preventing summer melt. Additionally, Adelman's (2006) momentum theory posits that a successful student outcome leads to further successful outcomes. By adopting early orientation, PERT re-examinations, and summer bridge programs, transition out, in, and through community college could provide for increased transition rates to 4-year universities.

Implications

My findings have the potential for positive social change at various levels. Individuals, students, can benefit by attending orientation, belonging to study groups, joining clubs, and for those not prepared for college upon graduation from high school, by participating in summer bridge programs that may alleviate the need for pre-college classes allowing matriculation into college-level courses more quickly (Kodama et al., 2018). Other individuals who can benefit from my findings may be faculty. Students in this study consistently reported their perception of the faculty's lack of concern toward student or classroom outcomes. Whether true or not, the perception is the students' reality. Administration could provide training that would assist in communication skill improvement for faculty to students so that this perception was eliminated or at the very least reduced.

Institutions throughout higher education can benefit from my findings in realizing the outcomes regarding a sense of belonging that was gained by students through orientation. Orientation is the launch pad that led these students to have a positive sense of belonging which led to many students then seeking out academic advising. Fuller planning of orientation activities may help smooth the transition to college, particularly for low socioeconomic status students.

Further, from the results, it appears that institutions can benefit from my finding that lower socioeconomic status students feel that developmental advising provided more information during their early days in transitioning to the community college. First-generation students also felt abandoned when they lost developmental advising. It is also

my interpretation that students who required pre-college coursework would have benefited greatly from developmental advising. Overall, perhaps developmental advising is needed more throughout the student population but more so in the lower socioeconomic status student community.

Conclusions

Based on my findings with this small group of students, I believe SCC sets the benchmark for other community colleges regarding lower socioeconomic status student experiences with a sense of belonging. The mentorship program that exists for nursing students as experienced by participants Dallas and Mason provided positive experiences in belonging, advising, and preparedness. Establishing a mentorship across all majors would play a huge role in retention and completion. While student loan debt was not at all part of this study it is a topic of interest throughout the country. Students at 4-year universities could earn credit toward decreasing their student loans by becoming mentors. Universities would seemingly gain more students with the positive outcomes of mentors on retention and completion at community colleges. Society would benefit from more college graduates, the economy would benefit, and the decrease in repayment of student loans based on credits mentors would receive would not only lighten the burden on the student, but from creating a more highly educated workforce, the government should not see a loss from the deletion of debt but an increase in taxable income potentially decreasing the default rate on student loans.

The most impactful conclusion garnered from my study was my realization that each of the three areas, a sense of belonging, advising, and preparedness, had a measure

of dependence on the other areas in the study. Students who required pre-college course work were not disappointed in this requirement and accepted the responsibility for the need to improve their readiness for college. These same students were eager to accept advice from academic advising to continue and move on and into their college experience. All the students, those who were not as prepared and those who had positive experiences or negative experiences with academic advising, all had positive experiences regarding a sense of belonging.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

RQ: What are the experiences of lower socioeconomic status students concerning a sense of belonging, academic advising, and college preparedness during the transitioning process from community college to a 4-year university?

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?

   Probing questions if needed:

   a. What do you do, if anything, in addition to being a student?

   b. Are you originally from here?

   c. Where did you go to high school?

2. How did you come to attend the community college?

   Probing questions if needed:

   a, What influenced your choice in attending this school?

   b. Before classes started did you participate in orientation, and what was it like?

   c. Did having a transitioning program to go on to a 4-year university play in your decision? Can you tell me about the role it played?

3. Tell me what it has been like for you at the college since you started?

   Probing questions if needed:

   a. What aspects of the school and your experiences here are most important to you?

   b. Are there aspects have you liked the most? Can you tell me about them?

   c. Are there aspects have you liked the least? Can you tell me about them?

d. How has academic advising helped you, if at all?

e. How do you contact or are contacted by academic advising?

4. Tell me about the things you do outside of the classroom?

Probing questions if needed.

a, Do you belong to any clubs?

b, What about rallies or student government?

c. Study with other students?

5. How does the transitioning program work, in your experience?

Probing questions if needed

a. Do you still intend on moving up to the 4-year institution? Why or why not?

b. Are there ways that high school prepared you for community college? Can you tell me about them?

c. Do you think community college is preparing you for the 4-year university?

6. In your opinion, which of these ways best describes the way you receive academic advising now? (I will provide the student with a printout showing and defining the different approaches, which I will briefly explain. They are prescriptive, invasive, developmental, and adviser-as-teacher.)

Probing questions if needed

a. Looking again at the list, is this the way you would prefer to receive advice, or would you prefer one of the other methods and why/why not?

b. Guessing what the 4-year university is going to be like, how do you think you would like to receive your academic advising there?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Follow-up Questions

1. Tell me about your interactions with faculty?
    a. Tell me about how your classroom activities are structured?
    b. Do you have any involvement with faculty outside of the classroom?
    c. Has a faculty member ever provided you with any advice about your education, and what did they tell you?
2. What was your experiences like with financial aid?
    a. Do you know the amount of aid you received, specifically in Pell grants?
        i. Since you did not receive the full amount (of didn't know) do you know if it was enough to pay for school?
    b. Had anyone ever made you aware that you could obtain up to a $500 advance on your financial aid to buy books?
3. We had talked extensively about how you felt in general about being welcomed here, do you think others felt the same and why or why not?
    a. Do you think there was an influencing factor that led these other students to not feel as welcomed here as you did?
4. You had told me a bit about what it was like inside your classroom and what the professors were like, but I would like to know more. Would you tell me again about your experiences with faculty and just how did they conduct themselves during class?

   a. Did you ever receive advice from a professor about how or what to pursue in your education, and if so, what was that like?

5. You are a first-generation student and told me you receive a lot of advice from academic advising. In fact, you told me it was more than just information about classes. Would you tell me more about that?
   a. How do you feel about the way advising is handled since you reached your second year here?
   b. Do you think other students would benefit from the way you were advised at first?
6. How do you think your involvement in high school, academically, compares to the way you are working on your classes now at SCC?
   a. Would you mind sharing with me information about your GPA in high school and your GPA now?
7. And just to wrap things up, thinking about all you have shared with me, is there anything else you could add that might help me understand students enrolled at Community College, who plan on going on to SU or another 4-year school who are receiving a Pell grant?
   a. Is there anything else you could share with me about your own personal experiences?